



UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

By Guglielmo Ferrero

The Greatness and Decline of Rome

In Five Volumes

Vol. I.—The Empire Builders

Vol. II.—Julius Cæsar

Vol. III.—The Fall of an Aristocracy

Vol. IV.—Rome and Egypt

Vol. V.—The Republic of Augustus

Characters and Events in Roman History

From Cæsar to Nero (60 B.C.—70 A.D.)

Ancient Rome and Modern America

A Comparative Study of Morals and Manners

Between the Old World and the New

A Moral and Philosophical Contrast

A Short History of Rome

In Two Volumes

Problems of Peace in Europe

**The Ruins of Ancient Civilization and The
Triumph of Christianity**

**The Ruin of
The Ancient Civilization
and
The Triumph of Christianity**

**With Some Consideration of
Conditions in the Europe of Today**

By

Guglielmo Ferrero

Translated by

The Hon. Lady Whitehead

**G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1921**

Copyright, 1921
by
Guglielmo Ferrero

Printed in the United States of America

FOREWORD

SIGNOR FERRERO has given us one more arresting work on the subject which he has made his life study. Though his reputation is already world-wide amongst scholars and thinkers, I should like to be allowed to say one word to that large and ever-increasing number of men and women on both sides of the Atlantic who are not classical scholars or students of history and who, living as many of them do isolated by circumstances, whether in the depths of the country or in crowded cities, have no kindred spirits with whom they can discuss the thoughts that surge up in their minds. In Signor Ferrero's pages they will find many of the data for which they have unconsciously been searching, cleverly sketched for them by a master hand, and stirring parallels drawn between the third century and their own. The world is realizing that the great treasures of its magnificent heritage are in danger of

being swept from it in the whirlpool of unrest which has followed the awful calamity that recently threatened its very existence, and men and women of every class are asking themselves what they can do to avert disaster. Signor Ferrero does not pretend to answer that question, but, by restating the history of the past in modern terms to a generation which has forgotten or has never read Gibbon, he has given the priceless aid of clear knowledge to the citizens whose views constitute the public opinion of the present, and upon whose right thinking the whole future of civilization depends.

E. W.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE INTERNAL DECOMPOSITION	I
Civilization in the Empire in 235—Fifty years later— Development of the Imperial authority—System of elections—Powers of the Senate—Senate acquires new prestige—Two aristocracies—Vespasian—Fusion of Romanism and Hellenism—Disintegration of the new aristocracy—Marcus Aurelius—Commodus—Conflict between Senate and Emperor—Septimius Severus— Caracalla and Geta—Macrianus—Heliogabalus— Alexander Severus—Legions and Senate in opposition —War with Persia—Death of Alexander Severus— Maximin—Civil Wars—Causes of social decom- position—Annihilation of Senate's authority—Empire without any guiding Principle.	
II	
THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY	41
Maximin—Principle <i>vs.</i> force—Military revolts—Imperial authority weakened—Reaction in favor of Senate— Invasions and civil wars—Valerian—Partition of the Empire—Increasing audacity of the Barbarians— Menace of Germanic peoples—Population decimated —Agricultural and industrial troubles—Commercial crisis—Bad fiscal system—Disappearance of aristo- cracy and middle classes—Standard of culture lowered —Polytheism dying—Reaction in 268—Claudius— Goths defeated—Aurelian's reforms—Mithraism— Reaction against absolutism—Diocletian remaking the Empire—Progress of Christianity—Attitude of emperors to Christianity—Effect of Christianity on the Empire.	

III

DIOCLETIAN AND THE REFORM OF THE EMPIRE

PAG
8

Civil war—Two emperors—Empire menaced by Barbarians—Revolt of Carausius—Troubles in the East—Administration further divided—Distribution of the provinces—Diocletian's reforms—Deification of Diocletian—A bureaucratic system—Double aristocratic principle—Christianity and moral equality—Separation of civil and military authority—Parcelling out of the provinces—*Dioceses*—Augmentation of the army—Taxation—Recovery of Britain—Troubles in the East—Peace with Persia—Order established within the Empire—Secret undermining of Diocletian's reforms—Ancient culture *vs.* Christianity—First anti-Christian edict of Diocletian—Revolution in Syria—Second edict against the Christians—Testimony to the power of Christianity—Edict of 308—Eight years of persecution—Retirement of Diocletian and of Maximian.

IV

CONSTANTINE AND THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

12

Three principles of authority—Constantine proclaimed Cæsar—Maxentius—Six emperors—Carnuntum Conference—Rivalry of Augusti and Cæsars—Persecution of Christians suspended—Explanation of change of policy—Constantine's triumph—Congress of Milan—Edict of Toleration—Defeat of Maximinus—War between Constantine and Licinius—Truce—Fall of Byzantium—Christianity the religion of the Empire—Divinity of Emperor renounced—Reorganization, political and administrative—Classification of officials—Provincial organization—Organization of the army—Removal of capital to Byzantium—Weakening of the Empire—Constantinople—Empire divided by Constantine—Moral unity menaced—Religion as a political instrument—Arian Controversy—Council of

Contents

vii

Nicæa—Athanasians—Council of Tyre—Theological disputes—Aim of defenders of orthodoxy—Endeavor to discipline thought—Constantine founds university—Spiritual crisis of St. Augustine—The Empire after Constantine's death—The East and the West—Theology—Beginning of great states and intellectual emancipation.

V

IN THE THIRD AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES . 177

The political crisis—Opposing principles—Annihilation of authority of Senate—Empire of the East—Empire of the West—Analogy of Europe with old Rome—Political results of world war not yet realized—Survey of 18th and 19th centuries—Conceptions of government—Thirty Years' War—Philosophical and rationalistic conceptions—French Revolution—Sovereignty of people—Congress of Vienna—The Holy Alliance—Universal suffrage—Revolution of 1848—Conditions in Europe to World War—Monarchical principle overwhelmed—Twentieth-century Europe between two principles—Governments resting on sovereignty of people—Dictatorships—Three countries with working governments.

.

I

The Internal Decomposition

.

I

THE INTERNAL DECOMPOSITION

IT is generally believed that the ancient civilization, that is the civilization of Imperial Rome, died little by little after an agony of many centuries. This opinion by no means conforms with the truth; at all events not in so far as the West is concerned.

When, in the year 235, the Emperor Alexander Severus was killed by his revolted legions, the ancient civilization was still intact in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia. In the recesses of their temples, which had been erected or restored in the course of three centuries, with all the magnificence for which the growth of an increasing prosperity gave warrant, the gods of the Greek or Roman polytheism and the native divinities, Hellenized or Romanized, of the provinces watched over the social order of the whole Empire. From the fertile womb of polytheism a new cult even had been born during these cen-

4 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

turies, the cult of Rome and Augustus, which still symbolized at the opening of the third century, on the banks of the Rhine and the Euphrates, the majestic unity of the Empire. A kind of cosmopolitan mixture, thick, and coloured, composed of Hellenism, Romanism, and Orientalism, a civilization brilliant and superficial, spread like priceless glaze on rustic pottery over the whole Empire.

Two aristocracies, one imperial, which resided in Rome, the other provincial, which had its home in the secondary towns, were prepared by Greek culture, by Roman culture, or by the two together, to govern the Empire with wisdom, justice, and magnificence. The fine arts—sculpture, painting, and architecture—flourished, although, in satisfying the taste of a public so vast and so cosmopolitan, they had lost the simplicity and purity of the great epochs. Philosophy and literature were cultivated with zeal, although without great originality, by a growing crowd of men and women of the middle and superior classes.

Everywhere, even in the small towns, schools multiplied. The study which was then held in the highest esteem, which was pursued

with the greatest ardour, and which was deemed worthy of the highest reward, was the Law. The Empire was teeming with lawyers. The qualities which make a great lawyer, perspicacity, subtlety, dialectic force, the sense of equity, the spirit of invention in the ordering of principles, led by a straight road to high offices in the court or the army. To bring justice to the world by a system of law, which was the work of reason and equity, had become the mission of the great Empire which so many wars had founded: a mission the most noble and elevated which a State of the ancient world could set before itself and that realized completely the great doctrine of Aristotle which sets forth that the supreme aim of a State is neither riches nor power, but virtue. The large and small towns in all the provinces vied with each other in the construction of the most beautiful buildings, in establishing schools, in organizing sumptuous fêtes and ceremonies, in encouraging the studies most in favour at the time, and in making provision for the well-being of the poorer classes. Agriculture, industry, and commerce flourished; the finances of the Empire and of

6 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the towns were not yet in too bad a condition, and the army was still sufficiently strong to impose upon the barbarians hovering on the frontiers respect for the name of Rome.

Fifty years later, all this was changed. The Greco-Roman civilization and polytheism were in their death-agonies. The gods fled from their deserted and crumbling temples to take refuge in the country. The refined aristocracies which governed the Empire with so much magnificence and justice, and which had erected the great monument of national law, had disappeared. The Empire was a prey to a despotism which was at the same time feeble and violent, which recruited its personnel from among the civil and military functionaries of the most barbarous peoples of the Empire. The Western provinces, including Gaul and Italy, were almost completely ruined. The countryside and the smaller towns were depopulated, and what remained of men and riches went to swell the congestion in the large centres; the precious metals disappeared; agriculture, industry, and commerce degenerated, and the arts and sciences were in abeyance.

The Internal Decomposition 7

Whereas the two preceding centuries had endeavoured to realize one great political unity in the Empire which should rise above all the immense variety of religions and cults, the new epoch which was dawning would create one great religious unity, in the middle of a dismembered empire. The Greco-Latin civilization, destroyed in its material elements by anarchism, depopulation, and economic ruin, was decomposed in its spiritual life by Christianity, which replaced polytheism by monotheism and endeavoured to build on the ruins of the political and military spirit a universal religious society solely preoccupied with moral perfection. In fact, the ancient civilization was no more than an immense ruin. No human effort could succeed in preventing the final catastrophe. How can one explain such a change? What then had happened during those fifty years?

I

To comprehend this great crisis of human civilization, we must go back to the beginnings of the Empire and understand the nature of

8 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the Imperial authority as it had been formed in the womb of the little Latin Republic. Historians persist in making of the Roman Empire, during the first two centuries of our Era, an absolute monarchy conceived on the same principles as the dynasties which governed Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And, in truth, the Roman Emperor so far resembled the monarchs of earlier centuries, in that his power lasted as long as his life, and also because, if that power was not exactly absolute it was sufficiently great for the differences not to be clear to minds accustomed to the forms and principles of the modern State.

Notwithstanding, the Roman Empire differed from true monarchy, either ancient or modern, because, until the time of Septimius Severus, it never acknowledged the hereditary or dynastic principle as the base of its organization. The Emperor, like the republican magistrates, only acquired his power by election; parentage or birth were never accepted as legitimate titles to authority.

It is true that more than once the members of the same family retained power during suc-

cessive generations; but this was always for reasons of fact and not by right. In all these cases the historian can trace the reasons of fact. This difference suffices to make us conclude that until the time of Septimius Severus the Empire was neither an absolute monarchy nor properly to be called a republic. It was a *régime* intermediate between the one and the other principle, and this uncertain character was a cause of weakness which the historians have neglected to study, but which exercised the greatest influence on the destinies of the Greco-Latin civilization.

The great problem in all political systems which are not founded on the hereditary principle, but depend upon the choice of the people, is to find a system of election which can prevent the elective principle from being falsified by fraud or violence. For reasons too numerous to examine here, but whose principles were deduced from the uncertain character of the Imperial authority, Rome did not succeed in fixing the rules for the Imperial elections in such a way that all hesitation as to procedure was impossible and the temptations to fraud and violence avoided. In

10 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

principle the Emperor must be elected by the Roman people in "*comitia*." It is quite true that the power was conferred upon him by a "*lex de imperio*," of which we can affirm that, at least up to the time of Vespasian, it was subject to the "*comitia*" and formally approved by them. But we know also that, under the Empire, the "*comitia*" had become only a constitutional fiction, and that in voting the "*lex de imperio*" they were only sanctioning the test of the "*Senatus-consulta*" by which the Senate had conferred the power on the Emperor. The body which actually validated the authority of the Emperor by conferring on him the constitutional power was therefore the Senate. The Senate in consequence ought really to have chosen the Emperor on whom it could confer the legal authority. But for various political and constitutional reasons, the Senate was not in a position to enforce this right in all cases or with all the necessary freedom of action. So much was this the case that it sometimes selected and imposed upon the Empire the chief of its choice, whilst at other times it happened that it had to content itself with

The Internal Decomposition 11

ratifying the choice made by other social forces. Nerva, for example, was chosen by the Senate, whilst Tiberius was imposed upon the Senate by a political and military situation which had nothing in common with the views of that illustrious assembly. Claudius and Nero were imposed by the prætorians, Vespasian by victory and by the soldiers. From the time of Nerva to that of Marcus Aurelius, during the most brilliant period of the Empire, a mixed system was adopted; the Emperor chose amongst the Senators, and in agreement with the Senate, the man whom he thought most qualified to succeed him, adopted him as his son, and associated him in power as his aid and partner. When the Emperor died, the Senate, in conferring the Imperial power upon the adopted son, only ratified the choice to which it had already consented.

In fact, there was within the Empire a body which could and should have elected the Emperor, but this body, the Senate, had not always the authority and strength necessary to exercise its powers to the full; and often contented itself by ratifying the Emperor who

12 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

was chosen by others. It still, however, retained this office, for the authority of no Emperor was legitimate until he had received it from the Senate by means of the "*lex de imperio*." The Roman Senate under the Empire could, therefore, be compared to those parliaments of many modern States which in principle ought to choose, but which in reality only legitimize by their approbation, the governments elected by the court or by powerful coteries who are outside the parliament. It is for this reason that modern historians affect a great disdain for the Senate of the Imperial epoch, which they describe as a mere mummy bequeathed by the Republic to the Empire, venerable certainly, but useless and an encumbrance in the new constitution. The nineteenth century has seen too many revolutions, and has been too much accustomed to confuse authority with force, to be able to appreciate in just measure an institution of which the rôle was to give the stamp of indelible legitimacy to the Imperial authority. But, now that revolution has rudely been awakened in the depths of the steppes and is advancing to the frontiers of

The Internal Decomposition 13

Western civilization, it will be useful and wise to try to understand how the prosperity of the Empire during the first century was partly due to an institution which to many modern historians appeared useless, because its functions were more formal than substantial.

II

Although a large number of the historians, following the example of Mommsen, insist on immolating the Senate—as a scapegoat—on the tomb of Cæsar, it is, nevertheless, certain that the Senate not only continued to live and govern the Empire after the death of Cæsar, but in the second half of the first century did, like an old tree that has been grafted, bring forth new fruits. It recovered itself, it acquired a new prestige, and it governed the Empire with an energy and wisdom which can sustain comparison with the most renowned epochs of the Republic. How was this brought about? What was the miraculous graft which produced this transformation in the old trunk? Let us try to explain the matter briefly.

14 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

During the first century of the Empire, which was an epoch of prosperity and peace, many families, natives of the North of Italy, of Gaul, of Spain, and of Africa, became enriched and constituted part of the new local aristocracies. As was natural, riches gave to these families the desire to shine and to predominate; they sought, in the peace by which they were surrounded, a model which they might imitate and which would serve to refine them and render them worthy of the popular admiration, so that they might become a veritable aristocracy endowed with a moral and intellectual superiority that would place them above the poorer population and people of humbler means.

With the exception of some noteworthy families who sought this model amongst the yet warm ashes of national traditions and the epochs of independence, most of them found what they were looking for among the nobility at Rome; and not so much with the nobility of the day, the epoch of Tiberius and Nero—prodigal, fastidious, inactive, undisciplined, and feeble—as in the figures delineated in glowing colours by Cicero, Sallust,

Horace, Virgil, and Titus Livy, of the solemn and venerable old Roman aristocracy. For the great Latin literature was not only a distraction for the rich, idle, and curious aristocracy, but the most noble organ of the Roman power, the spiritual vehicle which propagated at the same time knowledge of the Latin tongue, the taste for *belles lettres*, and the doctrines of morals and politics in which the Roman aristocracy believed. From generation to generation, a new *élite* class was being developed in the provinces of the West and of Africa, emerging from the confused equality of the vanquished. Educated by Latin preceptors, the new generations studied the great authors, as masters not only of form but also of thought and sentiment. The young Romans grew up having before their eyes the marvellous model of the ancient Roman nobility, not as in truth it really had been, but as it had been painted, despoiled of its vices and its weaknesses, by the luminous pencil of Titus Livy and set in the grand frame of his immortal history. They were fascinated by the simplicity, the civic devotion, the bravery in war, the fidelity to the national

16 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

traditions, civil and religious, of this model, artistically idealized. They persuaded themselves that a man could have no more elevated ambition than to be received into that aristocracy and into the Senate by which it was represented.

Until the time of Nero, however, the exclusive spirit remained very strong in ancient Rome. Few provincial families succeeded in forcing the portals of the Senate. It was composed almost entirely of families who originated in Central Italy: an aristocracy which was too circumscribed for such a great Empire, that was being undermined by so many ancient and new vices. A century of peace had not been able to extinguish the discords, the hatreds, and the rivalries which had always divided these families;—it had, on the contrary, heightened still more the pride and spirit of exclusiveness which had from all time characterized the old Roman nobility. To these old faults new ones were added: a frenzied luxury and a kind of scepticism that induced a dabbling in all sorts of dangerous, exotic beliefs. This restricted and outgrown aristocracy was the principal cause

The Internal Decomposition 17

of the serious troubles that agitated the Empire from Augustus to Nero, and it would, perhaps, have led the Empire to its doom, had it not been that there came into being in the provinces a new aristocracy which, grafted onto the old trunk, was to give to the Senate new life and vigour.

The man who succeeded at an opportune moment in compassing this delicate operation was Vespasian. The terrible civil war which was let loose at the death of Nero had at last made evident the inveterate egoism, the exclusive spirit, and the futility of the old aristocracy. The danger was too great,—and every man of sense understood that it was necessary to renew and to fortify the body politic whose duty it was to choose and assist the Emperor; and Vespasian was able to accomplish without too much difficulty a great reform which a few years before would have been impossible. The ancient historians tell us that having assumed the authority of censor, he chose a thousand families amongst the most important in the provinces, inscribed their names in the Senatorial and Equestrian orders, made them come to Rome, and recon-

18 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

stituted the Roman aristocracy from top to bottom. Vespasian deserves to be considered as the second founder of the Empire after Augustus, for in this way he gave to the Empire a new aristocracy in many ways superior to the old. Coming from the provinces, this aristocracy was more economical, more simple, and of more austere habits, more active, more serious, and above all more devoted to the great Roman tradition, republican or aristocratic, than was the old aristocracy originating in Italy, that had been spoilt by the civil wars, success, and the riches and peace of the first Empire. By virtue of one of those surprises of which history by some mysterious caprice is full, the grandsons of the Gauls, the Spaniards, and the Africans conquered by Rome, were more truly Roman than the descendants of those families of Central Italy which had conquered the Empire! The spirit of Rome, moribund in Italy, lived again in the provinces.

Tacitus, Pliny the Elder, and Pliny the Younger in literature, Trajan and Hadrian in politics, represented this new provincial aristocracy, which applied with sincerity and

firmness to the government of the Empire the political and moral principles of the Republic, understanding how to adapt these to the new situation of the world, combining with them the art and philosophy of Hellenism, and through this fusion of Romanism and Hellenism creating the true civilization of the Empire. During the century in which this aristocracy controlled the government, the world was able to enjoy great tranquillity and prosperity because the authority of the Senate was respected at the same time as the authority of the Emperor; and there never arose the shocks and antagonisms which historians have imagined between the two powers, for the purpose of proving at any cost that the Empire of the first two centuries was in reality a monarchy. Therefore, as we have already said, the Senate, working in accord with the Emperor, chose the man who was to succeed him. The State was really a Republic governed by the Senate and the Emperor, the latter respecting the rights of the former and the former accepting the authority of the latter, as the most eminent and powerful of its members.

20 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

No uncertainty ever arose concerning the election of an Emperor, or concerning the conditions requisite for its validity. The grave defect in the Imperial constitution was thus momentarily set aside. The authority of Trajan, Hadrian, Antony, and Marcus Aurelius, was recognized by all without being undermined, as had been that of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero, by the secret and irreducible opposition of the nobility, and no longer being weakened by violent discords within the powerful group which had the government in its hands, the Roman State could in the course of this century accomplish in its immense Empire great works of peace and of war.

III

But the principles of civilization and the classes who are charged with the duty of carrying these out, wear out in time. Well-prepared and strong as it was, that new aristocracy which had been evolved from the *élite* of so many provinces could not escape the common lot.

Little by little it was disintegrated, partly,

The Internal Decomposition 21

as is the case with all aristocracies, by internal exhaustion, and partly because it was gradually decomposed by philosophies and by the spirit of universal religion which acted upon it from the outside. Roman patriotism was a national, exclusive, and aristocratic doctrine, and in consequence it became a kind of armour, in which a people and a State clothed themselves, so as to remain separate from the rest of the world. It was therefore in direct contradiction to the philosophies and to universal religions, such as Stoicism and Christianity, which imposed upon all men and all peoples, however different they might be the one from the other, one principle of equal morality.

Already enfeebled by internal exhaustion and by the action of philosophies and universal religions, this aristocracy was at last taken by surprise by a political crisis which annihilated it. This political crisis deserves to be carefully studied for with it began the ruin of the ancient civilization. Marcus Aurelius is celebrated not only as an Emperor. His "Thoughts," constitute one of the most beautiful monuments of human wisdom. For

22 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

eighteen centuries the world has read and admired them. One must, however, agree that philosophy, called upon in the person of this celebrated Emperor to rule the world, behaved itself strangely in the matter of the succession which other less philosophical Emperors had determined so well. Instead of coming to an understanding with the Senate as his predecessors had done, and choosing Claudius Pompeianus whom the Senate proclaimed to be the most worthy, Marcus Aurelius associated with himself, in 177, as partner, his fifteen-year-old son, Commodus, bestowing upon him the tribunician power.

How it was that just a Stoic philosopher should have tried to introduce the dynastic principle into the Republican aristocracy which governed the Empire, is one of those mysteries which the ancient books do not allow us to clear up. But the consequences of the error were terrible. When Marcus Aurelius died in 180, Commodus was eighteen years old; he possessed therefore neither the age nor the preparation necessary to fulfil the heavy task which was laid upon him.

Partly on account of the manner in which

The Internal Decomposition 23

Commodus had been imposed upon the Senate, and partly on account of the incapacity of the new Emperor, it was not long before a violent conflict arose between the Senate and the head of the Empire, a conflict so violent that Rome had seen nothing like it since the days of Domitian. And, as in the days of Domitian, so this new struggle between the two supreme powers of the State ended in a conspiracy. But, whereas after the death of Domitian the Senate had been able to master the situation and to impose on the Empire its own candidate, in the person of Nerva, this time, after the assassination of Commodus, it did not succeed in dominating the situation, nor in again securing any kind of legal transmission of the supreme authority. The question of the succession gave rise to a civil war, which resulted in erecting on the ruins of the authority of the Senate the military absolutism of Septimius Severus.

Septimius Severus belonged to a family of Lepti, only recently ennobled, but very rich and very cultivated. He was the first of his family to become a member of the Senate. He had cultivated Latin and Greek letters

24 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

with equal ardour, and he had espoused Julia Domna, the child of one of the richest families in Syria, to which the cult of the Sun owed some of its most celebrated priests. An African, recently ennobled, Hellenized and Romanized, yet being also largely under the influence of the Asiatic East, Severus was not the man to respect the authority of the Senate as the great Trajan had respected it a century before, and particularly not after the Senate had declared itself against him in the Civil War. The Senate, for reasons of which we are ignorant, had put all the authority of which it could dispose at the service of his enemies. The African took revenge when victory declared itself in his favour, by applying himself to undo all that Vespasian had done. Strong in the fidelity of his legions, he weakened and impoverished the historic nobility as much as was possible by means of executions and confiscations; he humiliated it by diminishing its privileges and prestige in favour of the Equestrian order; he assigned to the latter many offices until then reserved to the Senators, and began to institute amongst the Equestrians a class of functionaries elected by and depend-

ent upon himself, to whom he gave new titles of honour (*vir egregius, vir perfectus, vir clarissimus*). He undertook to rule by absolute power, reinforced the dynastic principle, and, by dividing the Empire between his two sons, treated it frankly as a family property. He made the army superior to the Senate as a political power, and accepted the favour of the army and the power which he derived from it, as more valid titles of authority than the choice of the Senate. Septimius Severus was in fact the first real absolute, or almost absolute monarch of the Empire who dared to style himself officially "*dominus*." He dealt justice from his palace, and struck the authority of the Senate a decisive blow from which it never recovered. He accomplished a real revolution in the Empire, the revolution which so many historians have attributed to Cæsar!

And at the outset it did not seem as if the Empire had anything to complain of in this profound revolution which changed its character and nature. This abasement of the Senate could at first even be hailed as a benefit not only by official optimism but also by

26 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

impartial observers. The government of the last Antonines, especially that of Marcus Aurelius, had been just and clear-sighted, but very feeble, slow, and inactive, as are too often the governments of ageing aristocracies. The government of Septimius Severus was swift, resolute, full of virile initiative as that of a fortunate warrior can be who is at the same time intelligent and endowed with the qualities belonging to the real statesman.

But the dangers which the revolution accomplished by him carried with it revealed themselves when, at his death, the instrument, so well wielded by him, passed into more feeble hands. He had bequeathed the power, as if it were his private property, to his two sons, Caracalla and Geta. These two heirs did not agree. Caracalla assassinated his brother, and, remaining sole master of the Empire, became himself in his turn shortly afterwards the victim of a military conspiracy. After his death, the legionaries proclaimed Emperor the prætorian præfect, Marcus Opellius Macrianus, another African of merely Equestrian rank. It was the first time that the soldiers had dared to choose an Emperor outside the

ranks of the Senators. But the proclamation of the soldiers (despite what Mommsen has lightly declared to the contrary) was not a legal title, or of any value without the Senatorial investiture. That which one group of legions had given might be contested by another group, if the Emperor thus chosen was not of very strong individuality enjoying great personal prestige. Macrianus, indeed, tried to obtain the ratification of the Senate; but, while he was negotiating and manoeuvring to get his authority legitimized, another military revolt, fomented by the family of Septimius Severus, overthrew him, and Heliogabalus, nephew of Septimius Severus, was proclaimed Emperor. Barely fourteen years of age, Heliogabalus did not long maintain his power, which rested only on the mobile favour of the soldiers. At the end of four years, the very man who had elevated him to the throne overthrew him, and there remained only as Emperor his cousin Alexander Severus, whom, a short time before, his family and the soldiers had authoritatively associated with Heliogabalus. But these military revolutions, and the instability of the

28 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Imperial power which resulted from them, had so much alarmed the governing classes, beginning with the very family of Septimius Severus, that all turned towards the Senate to re-establish a government which should be strong and respected, of which the legal right should be incontestable, and which could impose itself upon the arrogance of the legions.

Alexander Severus returned, therefore, to the politics of Trajan, of Antoninus Pius, and of Marcus Aurelius, and even exaggerated their methods. He refused the title of "*dominus*"; he suppressed all ceremonial; he treated the Senators as equals; and confided once more to the Senate the choice of the principal functionaries (including the governors of the provinces). He constituted with the Senators the "*Consilium principis*." He announced that the Senators should co-operate with the governors; and, not only did he limit the authority of the Imperial procurators, but he caused them to be elected by the people.

Like Sylla, Augustus, and Vespasian before him, he once more opposed to the unchained

strength of military revolt, the Senate, that guardian of order and pillar of law. But it was for the last time. The legions were no longer, as in the first century of the Empire, recruited almost entirely amongst the Italians, who by tradition venerated the Senate as the Father of the nation. Their ranks were now full of provincials, drawn from the barbarian lands of the Empire, for whom the Senate was a vague far-away authority, only respected on account of its power. Besides this, the spirit which one may describe as "*Severian*," the ambition to be the sole prop of the Imperial authority, had too deeply penetrated the legions for them to be able to bow any longer before the Senate.

At last circumstances favoured their spirit of revolt. At this critical moment in the history of the West, a great revolution was proceeding in the East. The last King of the Parthians was overthrown; and the national dynasty of the Sassanides, reinstated on the throne, intended, not only to exterminate the Greek culture in Persia which the Parthians had favoured, but also to reconquer the territories of the ancient Persian Empire which

30 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

were then in the hands of the Romans. The Roman Empire found itself quite suddenly engaged in a great war with Persia.

Alexander Severus succeeded in repulsing the Persian invasion only by employing all the forces of the Empire including those which were defending the Western frontiers. The Alemans and the Marcomans took the opportunity to cross the Danube and the Rhine. Alexander Severus, occupied in the East, thought he could no longer count on repulsing the invasion by force of arms, and had recourse to negotiations and subsidies. The idea itself was a wise one from a political point of view. But the soldiers, feeling discontented that they were no longer masters of the State as in the time of Septimius Severus and of Caracalla, seized upon this pretext to revolt. They accused Alexander Severus of making the Empire a tributary of the Barbarians; they put him to death together with all his family: and they proclaimed Emperor the chief of the conspirators, a superior officer born in Thrace, a valiant soldier, but one who could hardly make himself understood in Latin: C. Julius Verus Maximin.

IV

This revolt marks the beginning of an interminable series of Civil Wars, of wars against outside enemies, of divers kinds of plagues, pestilences, and famines, which lasted for half a century without intermission and which depopulated and impoverished the Empire, destroying the *élite* by whom it had been governed, pacified, and civilized during the first two centuries. With this *élite* disappeared also the peaceful arts and the best of the Greek and Latin culture.

The reasons which caused the almost total disappearance of the antique civilization have been discussed *ad nauseam*. One can understand that this subject has continually tempted, and continues to tempt, those who think deeply, for few civilizations have been more glorious in the hey-day of their expansion or have suffered a more sinister fate. When we observe what has been the course of the civilization which, since the year 1000 has begun to bloom again in Europe on the ruins of the ancient one, we cannot help asking ourselves why it is that Europe has re-

32 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

joiced for nearly nine centuries in an almost uninterrupted development, in which the conquests and accumulated profits have always exceeded the losses; and for what reason, on the contrary, the vigorous and creative ancient civilization became the victim of a terrible catastrophe in which it almost completely disappeared. Certain people accept as the final cause the invasions of the Barbarians, forgetting that it then becomes necessary to explain how such a mighty Empire, which at that time was the custodian of the treasure of all military science, suddenly became incapable of defending its frontiers against a people who had learnt from itself the rudiments of the art of war and of government.

Others attribute this ruin to Christianity; others again to the preponderance which the inferior classes and the more barbarous peoples obtained in the Empire; others again to the overpowering weight of the taxes and the absolute nature of the government. But all these explanations, though partially true, explain nothing, unless one can demonstrate at the same time why Christianity could at a given moment impose its doctrines and insti-

tutions upon the Empire, for what reason the races which peopled the Empire; by mixing together, reverted to barbarism, and how it was that the State ended by strangling the Empire with its implacable absolutism and its insensate finance. All these terrible phenomena of social decomposition must have a first cause.

The first cause is a great political crisis: the political crisis which was engendered just by the civil wars that followed the death of Alexander Severus and that were prolonged for half a century. In what did this political crisis consist? In the total annihilation of the authority of the Senate, which so many historians have insisted was at this time a useless encumbrance in the political organization of the Empire. The Senate was annihilated by the barbarous legions who were no longer willing to accept its secular authority; by the fear which paralysed it in face of the unchained strength of the legions, when it discovered that its moral prestige no longer existed; by the destruction of the most powerful and respected families, and by the new, uncultivated elements which filled the ranks of the old

34 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

aristocracy, decimated by the civil wars. But when the Senate was completely despoiled of its authority, there was no longer in the whole Empire a power capable, even if it elected an Emperor, of legitimizing its choice; that is to say, in default of any principle of legitimacy in virtue of which all acknowledged themselves obliged to obey the Emperor, every trace of legal procedure for the election of the chief of the Empire had vanished. The legions chose the Emperors and their favour became the sole source of supreme authority. But the legions were numerous, they resided in distant countries, they were rarely in agreement, and they often changed their minds as to their choice.

How was it possible to decide otherwise than by war or by the sword between two or more emperors who were equally legitimate or illegitimate, for they had been chosen equally by the legions whose acclamations were equally valid? Incessant wars followed, pitiless and interminable; for force can always be called in again, at least so long as civilization is not completely exhausted. No doubt it was not the first time in the ancient world

that a people was left hanging as it were in mid-air after the fall of the institutions which had governed it during centuries. But usually the crises, although they had frequently been ruinous, were circumscribed, because these peoples were surrounded by States in whom the legal order was undisturbed and where power rested on a solid legitimate principle. The nations which were in a state of revolution could always borrow from the neighbouring countries that legitimate principle, and the model of the institutions that rested upon it, so as sooner or later to re-establish its government. If amongst one of these peoples a state of anarchy lasted sufficiently long to make its neighbours anxious, there was always one or other nation to be found ready to impose by force on the offender that order which he was no longer capable of imposing upon himself. It is for this reason that the wars of antiquity are so often bound up with the internal revolutions which troubled the States. For the first time, on the contrary, in the history of the ancient world in the third century of our Era, an immense empire found itself without any guiding principle by which it might distinguish

36 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

legitimate authority from violent usurpation, and without any political institution sufficiently strong to enforce that principle. That great Empire, which comprised great portions of Europe, Asia, and Africa, found itself, by reason of its extended area, protected even from an intervention which would have had the power to re-establish order and impose other principles and other institutions. Besides this, it could nowhere find a new legitimate principle and a model institution, for it was confined on the North, the West, and the South by turbulent barbarous populations; on the East there was indeed the new Persian Empire, which was not a barbarous State, but it was of recent foundation, hardly emerged from a civil war and animated by a hostile spirit towards the Roman Empire; and it was in addition so far off and so different! The Roman Empire, therefore, found itself abandoned to its own devices, and obliged to solve for itself the terrible problem which consisted in finding by its own unaided strength a new principle of authority and legality. From thence came the formidable explosion of violence that destroyed little

The Internal Decomposition 37

by little the greatest and best part of the antique civilization.



There is no doubt that the Greco-Latin civilization, intact and flourishing as it appeared at the beginning of the third century, had already been a long time undermined by a process of internal decomposition. It reposed upon a polytheistic system and upon a spirit of local tradition that we are tempted at each moment to confuse with the national spirit of our civilization, although it differs from it from many points of view. The cosmopolitanism of the Empire, the mixture of races, of religions, of manners, and of cultures, the unification of the government, the development of commerce and industry, the new religious and philosophical doctrines, had given the death-blow at one and the same time to polytheism and to the spirit of local tradition. Prosperity itself, the relative ease with which obscure families could enrich themselves, instruct themselves, and mount into the higher classes by riches or instruction or by riches

38 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

and instruction combined had been a hidden but profound cause of weakness. The Greco-Latin civilization was aristocratic to an extent that we sometimes find it difficult to understand; its strength consisted in the extremely limited number of pre-eminently capable men which it knew how to produce, and what it gained in profusion it lost in depth. The human equality which developed itself during the Empire under such varied forms, in religion, in politics, in manners, could only weaken it.

But all these hidden or deep causes could not have produced such a violent and universal catastrophe if a formidable political accident had not supervened to precipitate the crisis and render it irremediable. This political accident was the destruction of the authority of the Senate effected by the revolution of Septimius Severus. This destruction sufficed for the whole Empire to be left without a legitimate principle by which to recognize the Emperor who should have the right to command it; the absence of this principle of legitimacy let loose a succession of revolutions and wars which in fifty years annihil-

The Internal Decomposition 39

ated almost entirely the work of so many centuries.

The ruin of the ancient civilization is therefore the effect of slow decadence due to internal causes and to a terrible accident which destroyed at one fell blow the keystone of the arch of all legal order, and threw that civilization, already weakened by its own weight and by its internal decadence, into the convulsions of revolutionary despotism.

•

II

The Crisis of the Third Century

II

THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

I

ALEXANDER SEVERUS was killed, at the beginning of the year 235, in a revolt headed by a Thracian named Maximin. This Maximin had attained the highest grade in the militia by his own valour and the protection he had received from the family of Septimius Severus, though he had only an imperfect knowledge of the Latin tongue. He represented, therefore, one of the barbarous races of the Empire, races which were endeavouring to take the place of the old aristocratic Senatorial families.

On the death of Alexander Severus, the legions stationed at Mayence proclaimed Maximin Emperor.

Septimius Severus and his successors had endeavoured to justify their own despotism

44 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

by invoking, for form's sake at least, the authority of the Senate. Maximin decided upon a definite rupture with it. Force replaced the only principle of legitimate authority. The military despotism accepted the responsibility of finding in itself the necessary authority for exercising power.

Maximin, indeed, troubled himself only to obtain the support of the legions; he did not even seek to legalize his position through the Senate, and he assumed to govern as if that body no longer existed. Enfeebled and depressed as it was, the Senate had not yet reached the point of submitting to being humiliated in such a manner by a Thracian, without making an attempt to assert its ancient authority. What then passed in Rome is not well known. The facts can be deduced only with great labour from the fragmentary documents which have come down to our own day. 'It is, however, certain that the Senate nominated two emperors, Pupianus and Balbinus, the first an esteemed soldier who, springing from nothing, had reached the highest grades; the second, a Senator of mediocre intelligence, who was,

The Crisis of the Third Century 45

however, much esteemed and belonged to a great family. Thus personal merit and nobility of race were called upon by the Senate to combine together to lend their support to its expiring authority.

A principle of legitimacy has always need of force to ensure respect; but it is not necessary that, should that principle and that force come into conflict, the first,—*i.e.*, the principle—should ultimately succumb. It happens sometimes that in revolting against the principle of authority, of which it ought only to be the instrument, force itself is weakened. So it was in this case. The two emperors succeeded with the help of the Senate in constituting an administration which successfully obtained in a number of the provinces recognition as the legitimate government, and which organized an army against the usurper.

Maximin was not long in realizing that if the Government of Rome could consolidate its forces it would become a danger to his power which rested on the support of but a few of the legions. He made up his mind to overthrow the Senatorial government, and, coming into Italy with his army, he laid siege

46 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

to Aquileia which barred his way. But in Italy practically all the population was favourable to the Senate and opposed to the usurper, and when the legions came into conflict with the universal respect inspired by the institution which alone represented legality, their fidelity began to give way. The obstinate resistance of Aquileia completed the work, and in the spring of 238 Maximin was assassinated on the walls of Aquileia by the same soldiers from whom he had derived his power.

The Senate, Rome, Italy, and legality had triumphed over the semi-barbarous legions and over force and revolt. But the victory was short-lived. Discord broke out between Pupianus and Balbinus; the Senate did not know how to get the most out of their victory and irritated the soldiers without disarming them. Before the end of the year 238, another military revolt had put Balbinus and Pupianus to death and proclaimed Gordian Emperor.

Force had had its revenge.

During this time, the Carpi and the Goths had crossed the Danube; the Persians had invaded Mesopotamia and were menacing Syria. Gordian was young and inexperienced.

The Crisis of the Third Century 47

Fortunately he had found in his prætorian præfect an intelligent, capable man called Timesitheus who possessed moreover a quality rare in those days, namely, that of fidelity. Timesitheus reorganized the army and routed the Persians, the Goths, and the Carpi. These successes and the greatness of the public danger weakened the discord between the Senate and the legions, between legality and force.

Although he had been elected by the legions, Gordian encountered no opposition from the Senate. Unfortunately Timesitheus died in 243, and Gordian found no one better to replace him than a superior officer in the army called Julius Philip who was by nationality an Arab. He was a valiant soldier, but he was not as faithful as his predecessor had been. He wished to be, not the subordinate, but the colleague of Gordian; he obliged his soldiers to demand this honour for him, and when Gordian refused the request Philip caused him to be assassinated.

This was the third successful military revolt in the course of a few years. Force came increasingly into favour, and legality was en-

48 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

feebled by the tottering power of the Senate which at every turn was checkmated by the violence of the legions. Indeed this last revolt reverberated throughout the Empire with a larger influence than had come to those preceding.

The Imperial authority was weakened at its very centre, the revolution spread to the provinces, numerous usurpers sprang up everywhere, and the example became contagious. Every usurper argued that if the legions had the power to elect the Emperor, there was no reason why this privilege should be reserved for one province more than for another. Each group of legions could make claim for an Emperor. In the absence of a unifying principle of authority, force tends always to break itself and to crumble to pieces.

The danger soon became so serious that a reaction set in in favour of the Senate. Horror-stricken, men turned once more to the only principle of authority which still existed, despite the numerous outrages of which it had been the victim.

Arab though he was, Philip addressed himself to the Senate asking them to legalize his

The Crisis of the Third Century 49

election, hoping that thus he would be able to give that legal character to his appointment which his competitors lacked. The Senate resigned itself and recognized him, preferring to have at Rome an Emperor who, though elected by sedition, sought at least to confirm himself in his office by their sanction.

It is vain however for men to have recourse in the hour of their need to the principles of authority which, in order to satisfy their own ambitions, they have themselves weakened.

While Philip was seeking to consolidate his position by drawing closer to the Senate, the Goths again invaded the Empire; and the Danube Legions, displeased at seeing their Emperor lingering in Italy while the frontiers of the Empire were violated by the Barbarians, annulled the decrees of the Senate and saluted as Emperor, Decius, the Governor of Dacia and Moesia.

This brought about a new civil war.

Decius came to Italy, vanquished Philip at Verona, and killed him. He then recrossed the Alps in order to fight the Goths.

The success of Decius had however no great results for in 251 he died on the field of battle.

50 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

He was the first of the Roman Emperors who died fighting the Barbarians.

It is easy to imagine what an effect was produced by the death of Decius. The Legions, who from this time assumed that the disposal of the Empire was in their power, hastened to proclaim as Emperor the Governor of Moesia, Tribonian Gallus. But Tribonian, instead of fighting the Goths, preferred to treat with them and buy peace for a sum of ready money. Then the Legions again revolted and selected as Emperor Æmilianus, who had succeeded Tribonian as Governor of Moesia.

A new civil war followed, and Tribonian was defeated. Again the authority of the Senate was invoked to give to the new Emperor the legal standing necessary to strengthen his position in the government. The Senate recognized Æmilianus, but hardly had he been recognized when his legions for some unknown reason revolted, assassinated Æmilianus, and, in the year 253, saluted Valerian as Emperor.

Eighteen years had elapsed since the death of Alexander Severus, years of unceasing sedition. The authority of the Senate had been

The Crisis of the Third Century 51

undermined, and with it the corner-stone of legality. All rules and all fixed principles for the selection of the Emperor were put aside and the elections were given over to the caprices of the legions. The power capable of maintaining order no longer existed. Military revolts were multiplied, stimulated by a spirit of emulation, by the certainty of impunity, and by the hope of booty. Civil wars grew one out of another, enfeebling everywhere the defence of the frontiers. The Empire began to become the prey of the Barbarians, who emboldened by the growing feebleness of the colossus, attacked it on all sides. Between the years 254 and 260, the Goths again invaded Dacia, Macedonia, and Asia Minor; the Alemanni and the Franks threw themselves upon Gaul, a new Germanic race, the Saxons, made their appearance on the sea, along the coasts of Gaul and Brittany; grave troubles broke out in Africa and new dangers menaced the East where Armenia and Syria fell again under the influence of Persia. As if these disasters were not sufficient, a terrible epidemic of plague raged during these years, nearly depopulating whole regions of the Empire.

52 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Valerian, who was a Senator of a noble family, and of a certain capacity, then came to an understanding with the Senate, and in agreement with that body endeavoured to combat the terrible difficulties of the moment by a measure which was destined to involve little by little a complete dislocation of the ancient civilization. This measure was the partition of the Empire. He nominated his son Gallienus to be Cæsar and assigned to him the provinces of the West, reserving for himself those of the East. The unity of the Empire, that great work and great thought of Rome, was thus broken for the first time.

The idea which had prompted the decision of this reform is clear: *i.e.*, to reinforce the Imperial authority and with it the whole enfeebled government, by circumscribing the field of its activities which had grown too vast. But that was applying, so to say, a remedy of a geometrical nature which could not cure a moral evil. The government was weak because it had no title that was indisputable or universally acknowledged: the division of power could not offset an original vice.

While Gallus tried to curb to the best of his

The Crisis of the Third Century 53

ability the Germanic invasions in the West, Valerian essayed a great expedition against Persia. In 259, however, he was taken prisoner by the Persians and died in captivity, no one knew when or where.

A few years before, an Emperor had died on the field of battle fighting against the Barbarians—and now an Emperor was made prisoner! That was a terrible blow to the Imperial authority, the effect of which soon began to make itself felt. A kind of dismemberment of the Empire followed quickly upon this catastrophe.

From the year 258, the legions of Gaul had saluted Posthumus as Emperor. Posthumus, who was a man of merit, had succeeded after the death of Valerian in getting himself recognized in Spain and in Brittany where he founded a Gallo-Iberian Empire that, despite the attacks of Gallus, lasted till 267. At the same moment in the East, one of Valerian's generals named Macrianus, with the aid of the town of Palmyra and of its richest and most powerful inhabitant, a certain Odenathus, had of his own initiative fought with the Persians and driven them out, and had

54 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

thus saved the richest provinces of the East. Encouraged by this success, he had planned to seize the Empire for the benefit of his two sons.

Odenathus, on the contrary, remained faithful to the Emperor, and under the title of "*Dux Orientis*" made war against Macrianus.

The East and the West were dismembered, or on the point of becoming so.

The audacity of the Barbarians grew as the Empire became more feeble. In 261, the Alemanni invaded Italy and it was only under the walls of Milan that Gallienus succeeded in repelling them.

Soon afterwards the Franks came into Gaul and Spain and pushed on into Africa.

The Barbarians of Eastern Europe, the Goths, the Heruli, and the Sarmatians, pillaged the Black Sea coast, forced the Dardanelles, and penetrated into Greece and Asia. In 267, the Heruli were bivouacking in sacred Greece, at Athens and Corinth, at Argos and at Sparta.

Feeble and incapable, Gallienus knew not how to deal with so many calamities; despair seized the population, each province, each re-

The Crisis of the Third Century 55

gion hoping to be able to defend itself better alone, revolted and gave itself a special emperor. During the last years of the life of Gallienus, the pretenders, the "tyrants" as history calls them, are so numerous and so fleeting that it is almost impossible to trace their history.

In Germany, where the war against the Roman Empire was becoming (to employ a modern catch-word equally suited to the past) the great "national industry," it was understood that the moment was propitious for attempting a grand "coup." Several Germanic peoples agreed to constitute under the title of Goths and Alemanni, a powerful coalition against the Empire. In the spring of 268, a strong army crossed to the right bank of the Danube and invaded Eastern Macedonia, Greece, the Cyclades, Rhodes, Cyprus, and the borders of Asia Minor. At the same time another army entered Moesia and penetrated Macedonia. The plan was clear: they purposed to conquer the Balkan Peninsula, cut the Empire in two, and interpose themselves between the Eastern and Western provinces.

56 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

II

For thirty years the Empire had thus been a prey to military despotisms, invasions, civil wars, anarchy, plague, and famine.

The civil wars of the Republic had been trifling in comparison because the essential elements of civilization had not been menaced. This time it was different: the vital forces of the communities in the provinces of the West, beginning with the population, were stricken to death. Already insufficient in numbers in prosperous times, the population was now decimated by war, by invasions, by the general insecurity which prevailed, by universal impoverishment, and by incessant epidemics. The persistency with which the wisest of the emperors continued to transplant Barbarians into the territories of the Empire, and especially in the West, despite the political and military dangers which resulted, is the most illuminating proof of the dire need for men which was troubling the Empire. The rapid diminution of population had, as was only natural, engendered an agricultural and industrial crisis that aggravated the general impov-

The Crisis of the Third Century 57

erishment and that was in fact one of its causes. The agriculturalists, whether free colonists, slave workers, or small proprietors, disappeared in large numbers; the small properties shrank to nothing, while the big properties grew bigger, and there was a great increase in the uncultivated and abandoned lands. Industry, which had flourished so greatly throughout the Empire under the Antonine dynasty and even under that of Severus, was seriously undermined, partly through the death of so many artisans who had carried off with them the experience and the secrets of their perfected trades, partly on account of the growing poverty which diminished consumption.

A large number of mines, chiefly gold mines, were abandoned for want of the necessary workmen, and because the mining regions were being invaded by the Barbarians, while the precious metals were hoarded and hidden by the frightened population. Capital grew rare, and interest at twelve per cent., which, in the time of Nero, had been considered excessive, became the regular rate.

To the agricultural and industrial troubles was added a commercial crisis.

58 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

The general insecurity, the difficulty of communications, the greater risk, and the greater expense entailed in journeys, the restrictions imposed by the ever-growing poverty, had all contributed during the third century to retard commercial activity.

Small and moderate fortunes disappeared, and, in the midst of the growing misery, riches were concentrated in a few hands.

The smaller towns were depopulated and often abandoned. In the large towns the population accumulated and the number of mendicants who, begging in one form or another, lived at the expense of the rich or of the State, increased disproportionately. The State became the Providence and the tormentor of everyone. Its fiscal system, developed under the pressure of a multiplied bureaucracy of the mendicancy of the masses and of the augmentation of military expenditure, was atrocious and implacable. The taxes became innumerable, and their crushing weight was aggravated by the coinage policy. Partly to remedy the growing scarcity of gold and silver, partly to keep pace with the military expenditure and that of other public departments

The Crisis of the Third Century 59

without increasing the taxes too enormously, the Empire changed the weight and alloy of the coinage. Under Caracalla, the weight of the "*aureus*" had fallen to 6 gr. 55. but after the time of Alexander Severus it became so irregular that payments in gold were accepted only by weight.

In the case of the silver coinage it was even worse. The proportion of alloy in the "*denarius*" and the "*Antonianus argenteus*" issued for the first time by Caracalla, had, from the years immediately following the death of Alexander Severus, increased out of all proportion. But the "*antonianus*" under the Emperor Claudius, the Goth, contained only four or five per cent. of silver! It was distinguished from the copper coins only by the colour which was given it by passing it through a bath of silver, or, in case of necessity, of tin.

Even the bronze coins were issued at a reduced weight.

From thence came a giddy augmentation and a wild irregularity of prices, which reduced the unfortunate peoples to despair and against which the Emperors contended in vain by issuing edicts. Then arose continual impov-

60 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

erishment of the most numerous and least wealthy classes aggravated by the order which several emperors gave that the taxes must be paid in gold. The State refused to receive the bad money with which it was inundating the Empire!

Exterminated, ruined, or dispersed, the aristocracy and the middle classes which had grown up during the first and second centuries throughout the Empire, which constituted the foundation of its organization,—political and social,—and which by the fusion of Hellenism and Romanism had carried the ancient civilization to its zenith now disappeared. Their riches—those at least which were not destroyed—passed to a new oligarchy of “*nouveaux riches*” and high functionaries, civil or military, who were almost all recruited from the inferior classes and from the barbarous populations which had felt only from a very great distance the influence of Romanism and Hellenism.

The standard of culture was lowered everywhere,—in philosophy, in law, in literature,—because the new rulers despised it, or more simply were ignorant of it. The Empire sank

The Crisis of the Third Century 61

back internally into barbarism through the elevation to riches and power of the coarsest elements of the Empire, an influence more important than the mere external invasions of the Barbarians who lived on the other side of the Rhine or Danube.

Refined culture amongst those who were powerful in the State was no longer the rule but a happy exception. Decadence spread through all the industries and all the arts in which the Greco-Roman civilization had so much excelled, and which now became coarse and vulgar. Thus it was with sculpture, with jewelry, and with architecture. What remained of riches was wasted in barbarous luxury, which displayed bad taste, loudness, heaviness. This barbarous luxury was successful in dazzling the common horde, by violent and disorderly pleasures and festivities, by gigantic and useless constructions which encumbered rather than embellished the few big towns that still flourished in the midst of the ruins of the small ones. The poorer the Empire became, the more did public architecture tend towards the colossal.

Finally (it was the *coup de grâce* to the

62 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ancient civilization)—the old religion,—Pagan polytheism,—which had been the base of political, social, and intellectual life,—was about to die.

Eastern cults cropped up everywhere, threatening the moral overthrow of a world already shaken to its foundations by wars and revolutions.

III

Notwithstanding that for more than thirty years, since the death of Alexander Severus, the Empire appeared to have abandoned itself passively to the crisis which was destroying it, and although ignorance, intrigue, violence, and corruption seemed to have taken possession of the State forever, there still existed in that civilization moral and intellectual forces capable of attempting a desperate reaction. Despite the invading waves of Barbarians, the higher classes still felt the influence of a culture too ancient, too rich, and too great, to allow even its residue entirely to cease its activity.

The reaction came about in 268. A conspiracy of generals put Gallienus to death and

The Crisis of the Third Century 63

nominated this time as his successor, not an incapable intriguer, but Claudius, the best warrior of his time.

Claudius surprised the greater part of the Gothic army at Nisch (Naissus), overcame it, and pursued the remnants of it without truce or pity. Who can tell what good he might have been able to accomplish if the plague had not carried him off in 270? But he had for successor (duly acclaimed by the legions of Pannonia) Aurelian, the man whom he had himself designated, one of the generals who had fought with him against Gallienus. Aurelian was, like Claudius, a man of great character and great genius. He came at a good moment, for the Goths, who had been beaten by Claudius, were only the advance guard. In the year 270, Italy was invaded by the Vandals and by the Alemanni, who, in 271, destroyed a Roman army near Placentia.

Aurelian was the first man who tried by a vast and coherent plan of reforms and wars to arrest the decomposition of the Empire and its reversion to barbarism. He vanquished and destroyed at Pavia and Fano the Germanic invading armies, thus delivering Italy;

64 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

and he brought the East once more under the domination of Rome, despite the fact that a part of the territory had been detached after the death of Odenathus, and that an Empire of Syria had been formed under the sceptre of Zenobia, widow of Odenathus. He disembarrassed the Empire of all the little local "Emperors" who had during the preceding years come into power, and he reconstituted its unity and surrounded Rome with the powerful circle of gigantic walls which are still universally admired. Aurelian is properly entitled "*restitutor orbis.*"

He was, however, too wise not to realize that the unity which he had reconstituted would soon again be destroyed if he could not find a radical remedy for the ills which afflicted the Empire. Two of his dispositions are worthy of special attention.

The first concerned the frontiers of the Empire. Aurelian judged rightly that the Empire was too extended for its diminished power. He therefore resolved to abandon the dangerous salient of Dacia, which was watered with the blood of so many of Trajan's legionaries and the sweat of so many generations

The Crisis of the Third Century 65

of colonists. He gave the name of the abandoned province to the part of Moesia which extends along the right bank of the Danube.

The other disposition was political and religious. Aurelian instituted officially the cult of *Sol invictus* proclaiming Latinized *Mithraism* as the State religion.

To understand the importance of this great reform, we must remember that Mithraism was an Asiatic cult developed from a fusion of "Mazeism," and Semitic theology and other elements borrowed from the indigenous religions of Asia Minor. Like nearly all Asiatic religions, it was absolutist and monarchical, for it taught that monarchs reigned by divine right and received their rights from Mithras with whom they became co-substantial. The adoption of Mithraism as the official religion seems therefore to have been an act of profound policy; and an effort to find in mystical absolutism a principle of legality which should replace the old validation of the Senate, and to withdraw the Imperial authority from the caprices of legions which were continually revolting.

In the midst of the anarchy which was over-

66 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

whelming the Empire, Aurelian was indeed searching for a new legitimate principle, and he sought it where, after the extinction of all those engendered by the Greco-Roman world, it could alone be found, *i.e.*, in the Oriental absolutism, founded on a religious principle and in which the sovereign was himself divine.

This attempt, however, although amply justified by the political necessities of the situation seems to have met with strong opposition. Towards the end of 275, Aurelian in his turn fell a victim to a conspiracy of generals. For what motive? The matter is obscure. We know that in his character of representative of the *Sol invictus* Aurelian had employed himself resolutely in establishing order in the vast Empire, and it is certain that the zeal he employed in repressing the enormous abuses from which the Roman world was suffering must have made for him many enemies. But it is not impossible that the conspiracy was partly due to a reaction in the Greco-Latin spirit against the mystical absolutism which up till now had been victorious. One curious fact which would otherwise remain inexplicable would lead us to suppose

The Crisis of the Third Century 67

this. After the death of Aurelian, the legions refused to elect an Emperor and wished once more to entrust the new election to the Senate. Surprised at a mark of respect to which they had so long been strangers, the Senate at first wished to refuse; then designated its oldest member, the *princeps senatus*, Marcus Claudius Tacitus. Conditions were no longer, however, as they had been in the time of Trajan, and Tacitus, for having wished to govern like Trajan, was murdered by the soldiers a few months after his election.

Civil war once more broke out.

One party of the legions nominated Florianus, while another selected Probus, one of Aurelian's best generals. Probus was successful, and it is to be observed that although he was a disciple of Aurelian he continued the policy of Tacitus. He recognized the authority of the Senate, seeking thus to consolidate his own title; he gave back to the Senate the right of judging on appeal in criminal actions, of nominating governors, and even of ratifying Imperial constitutions. How can one explain this latest attempt to govern the Empire with the support of the Senate, after more than

68 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

half a century of troubles and civil wars at a time when the Senate was but a shade of its former self, except by admitting that the mystical absolutism of Aurelian had alarmed representatives of the small remnant of the Latin spirit?

This attempt, however, succeeded no better than the preceding one. Although Probus was a very capable general, he also fell a victim to the implacable violence of the Legions and anarchy reigned once more.

The Legions then elected M. Aurelius Carus who hastened to give the title of Cæsar to his two sons, Carinus and Numerian. He then initiated a war on Persia.

He had already occupied Seleucia and Ctesiphon when, at the end of 283, he died, killed by a thunderbolt according to some reports, or as a result of a military conspiracy, according to others. Numerian, who had accompanied him was a poet, incapable of commanding an army in such a difficult enterprise. Retreat was therefore decided upon. On the way, Numerian died also. The præfect of the prætor was then openly accused. An enquiry was ordered and entrusted to the

The Crisis of the Third Century 69

generals, who, on September 17th in the year 284, elected as Emperor the commander of the Guards, Diocletian.

IV

Diocletian is, after Claudius and Aurelian, the third in order of the great men who arose from the barbaric chaos of the third century.

It was he who resolutely took in hand Aurelian's plan which had been arrested by the final reaction of the old Roman and Senatorial spirit, *i.e.*, of making the Roman Empire an Asiatic Empire in the hands of an absolute sovereign, who should appear to his subjects as an incarnation of divinity itself. We shall see later how he tried to realize this great design and how it ended. For the moment, we may content ourselves with observing that the transforming of the Empire into a monarchy of the Asiatic type and the attribution of divinity to the sovereign, a policy which was attempted by Aurelian and again by Diocletian, seemed to be the only means open by which to re-establish for the Empire, in the midst of the chaos in which it was struggling,

70 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

a principle of legality that could replace the authority of the Senate. All the conditions necessary for success seemed then to exist. The Greco-Roman traditions were too much enfeebled to be able to maintain a long resistance. The reconstruction of a government which had not only force at its disposal but which was supported by a moral power, was for the Empire a question of life or death. There was not at that time in the whole civilized world known to the Greeks and the Romans, any other principle of authority that could have been adopted. The long duel between Asia and Greece, and Asia and Rome seemed about to end in the complete triumph of Asia, for all the powers which the Greco-Latin civilization had opposed to the mystical absolutism of the East were exhausted. Europe was about to become a mere appendage to Asia, when suddenly a defender arose. This adversary was formidable with a force quite different from that of the Greco-Latin civilization: it was absolutely invincible; it was Christianity.

During the crisis of the third century, Christianity had made great progress at the

The Crisis of the Third Century 71

same time as had Mithraism. It had spread throughout the Empire and among all classes. It had penetrated into the army, the Senate, and the Court, and had conquered alike the rich and the poor, the ignorant and the cultured. It had already produced a complex and profound theology, and it had constituted a simple but solid hierarchy, founded, not upon force like the Imperial power but simply on authority.

Its Church counted a numerous clergy, composed of Deacons, who formed the administrative staff, of the Elders (*πρεσβύτεροι*) who were the council of directors, and of the Bishops each of whom was the head of a local division of the Church, ruling as director, with full powers. The Bishop, nominated for life, was elected by the clergy with the assent of the assembly. He nominated, in his turn, the Elders and the Deacons; and at the time with which we are now concerned he was already a considerable personage in each town; not only because the numbers of the faithful were large, but because Christianity had already organized that wonderful system of works of benevolence which was one of its

72 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

greatest social creations and one of the causes of its triumph. The Christian communities undertook everything. Not only did they provide for the expenses of their cult and the payment of its ministers, but they undertook the assistance of widows, of orphans, of the sick, the impotent, the aged, and the unemployed, and of those who had been condemned for the cause of God. They took upon themselves the task of buying back the prisoners carried off by the Barbarians; they founded churches, took care of slaves, and buried the poor; they gave hospitality to their co-religionaries from abroad and they collected subventions for poor or menaced communities. The goods which the Christian communities possessed were derived in great measure from the gifts made by the rich of whom many, either in their lifetime or after their death, left to the Church the greater part or the whole of their fortunes. The Church accumulated in this way the goods of a portion of the superior classes in a gigantic mortmain, of which she dispensed the income, to a great extent for the benefit of all men struck down by disaster in whatever form it might be.

The Crisis of the Third Century 73

It is not difficult to imagine what a formidable instrument of power was represented in the midst of the general disasters of the third century by these accumulated riches and by the organizations instituted for help and benevolence. The Christian churches at that time appeared as havens in the midst of the storm. While the elect souls found the comfort of Christianity through their own trials and their own pain or by the sight of its effect on the pain of others, or carried away by a wave of longing for peace and blessedness by a movement of disgust at a world in a state of upheaval and contamination, the masses were in their turn attracted to the new Faith by the generous assistance which the Church gave to all unfortunates and which was animated by a divine breath, unknown to official help or to that given by the political protectors of the great families of the ancient Pagan State. If Faith attracted the faithful to the Church, other and more material ties reinforced efficaciously the power and authority of religion. The alms, subsidies, and assistance, the offices, the ecclesiastical charges and the revenues attached to them, and finally the administra-

74 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

tion of the lands recently acquired which employed an ever-increasing number of labourers, workmen, settlers, and administrators, were powerful factors in this connection.

Christianity had thus become at the same time a temporal as well as a spiritual power. But unlike Mithraism it did not enjoy Imperial favour. If it is an exaggeration to maintain, as certain historians do maintain, that all the Emperors of the third century were hostile to the Christians, it is at the same time certain that Christianity had to endure in that century cruel persecutions and that it was always regarded with distrust by the public powers, even when the bloody persecutions were in abeyance. This was a great contrast to the favour which was accorded to Mithraism.

What is the true reason for this attitude towards Christianity that has left such tragic memories in the history of the Church? The answer is to be found in the spirit of Christianity itself.

From the point of view of the Empire and of its immediate political interests it cannot be doubted that Christianity was a disinte-

The Crisis of the Third Century 75

grating element. As the crisis of the third century became aggravated, the new religion grew bolder in upholding with more or less fervour, according to the particular sect, that the Christian must not seek public employment or honours, nor any post that might endanger his faith. That is to say, he must not aspire to any of the highest or most important places, for he was forbidden under pain of losing his soul, to take charge of the temples, to organize the circus games, or to judge or prosecute his brethren. The world in which other men lived and which they enjoyed was tainted by a religion and a civilization that had been cursed by Christ. There was no joy or pain, no prize or punishment, which could induce the perfect Christian to participate in the dangerous vanities of a corrupted world. The Christian on the contrary aspired simply to escape as quickly as possible from this vale of sin and tears. Logically therefore it would be the duty of the Christian to destroy the Empire, and if he did not attempt this, it was because, as Tertullian has said, he was impregnated with the doctrines and the habits of gentleness, and violence was

76 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

repugnant to him. But to take part in the Empire's sinful and impious existence,—never! Rather death and misery than that.

One can easily imagine the effect on the highest minds of such doctrines at a time when the conduct of public functions had become difficult and dangerous: when the barbarous races were seizing the State and the more violent qualities of the human spirit were becoming more and more necessary for carrying on the government. Christianity was destroying the Empire by abstention. It deprived the central and the municipal administrations of the aid of numerous cultivated and intelligent men of the superior classes; it monopolized especially the best men from the point of view of morals, the greatest and noblest spirits. A little later the life of St. Augustine showed how the superior spirits ended by preferring religion to politics, the Church to public offices. Already in the third century, numerous citizens destined by law to the administration of public affairs, preferred to give their possessions to the Church and to escape by poverty from the heavy responsibilities of power. Others employed different

The Crisis of the Third Century 77

means, some of which were deplored by the Christian emperors themselves, and celibacy, sanctified by religion, became even more general than in the most critical moments of the Pagan world. The army suffered from this systematic abstention still more severely than the civil employments. Already in the second century Christianity had declared that it was not permissible to be a "man of the sword," and that the "son of peace" who must not even engage in a lawsuit, could still less take part in a battle. It had affirmed the incompatibility of military service with Christianity because "the Saviour, in disarming Peter, had clearly manifested His will that every soldier should lay down his sword." Nothing remained, therefore, for the Christian soldier but to abandon the army immediately and to resolve to suffer the fate of all other Christians for Christ's sake.

The canons of the Church of Alexandria gave their counsel against the volunteer—a foundation of the Roman army—and affirmed with authority that it does not become Christians to bear arms. Lactantius puts on the same plane the impossibility of participat-

78 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ing in a capital sentence and the taking part in a war, for to the Divine principle forbidding to kill "no exception can be made." St. Augustine finally demonstrated a little later on that it is quite indifferent for a good Christian if he lives under one government or another, whether he obeys the Empire or the Barbarians, provided that the State does not force him into any impiety or sin.

There is perhaps no tragedy in the human race which can be compared with this one. For ten centuries the ancient civilization had worked untiringly to create a State which should be perfect, wise, human, generous, free, and just, and which should cause beauty, truth, and virtue to reign over the world. That perfect State had been the supreme ambition of Greece and Rome, of Republican as well as Imperial Rome. Warriors and statesmen, philosophers and orators, poets and artists had given their best powers for centuries and centuries to this immense task. Aristides and Pericles, Scipio and Augustus, Plato and Aristotle, Demosthenes and Cicero, Homer and Virgil, Horace and Tacitus, Vespasian and Marcus Aurelius, had been

The Crisis of the Third Century 79

collaborators in this creative work. This marvellous effort of so many centuries and so much genius culminated in the third century of our Era,—and in what way? In the most appalling crisis of anarchy and disorder which was ever produced by the violent and corrupt despotism of brutal force, despoiled of all moral authority, in the destruction of the most refined civilization, and with the obligation of kneeling before a despotic Asiatic sovereign as before a living God, and all for the purpose of rescuing that part of the old world and of its treasures which could still be saved.

That monarchical bondage which during so many centuries had appeared to the Greco-Roman spirit as the most abject and the most ignominious under which a man could suffer, was the result secured by the long effort of the two greatest peoples of antiquity to create the perfect State. What civilization would not, in the face of such a cruel deception, have despaired of itself and of its future?

Christianity, however, knew on the contrary how to cope with this catastrophe which seemed to annihilate the whole conception of life of the ancient world. It brought about

80 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the most audacious, the most original, the grandest spiritual revolution the world has ever seen. It completely reversed the ancient point of view, affirming that the fact of a State being good or bad, just or iniquitous, wise or foolish is a matter which is important only for those who govern and who do the evil, but is comparatively immaterial to the governed who have to suffer from the misdeeds of those in power. The supreme object in life is the moral and religious perfection of the individual; each can attain to that perfection by his own effort, no matter whether the government under which he lives and its institutions are good or bad. Man has only one real master,—God; if he serves well that one and supreme Master, if he merits His love and His praise, the rest does not count. The powerful ones of this world become impotent.

It was this new conception of life by which Christianity revolutionized the intellectual and moral foundations of the ancient civilization from the top to the bottom, and which triumphed finally over the awful disorders of the third century and produced a supreme reac-

The Crisis of the Third Century 81

tion against disorder. Its triumph is the most important event of the third century. The influence which this new conception of life was called upon to exert on the future was immense, for it was destined to impart a new direction to all Western civilization during many centuries to come.

III
Diocletian and the Reform of the
Empire

III

DIOCLETIAN AND THE REFORM OF THE EMPIRE

I

THE man who had been elected to succeed Carus was, like Claudius and Aurelian, a Dalmatian, but his birth was even more obscure. One tradition even affirms that he was the son of an enfranchised slave. From his earliest years, he had been a soldier and had been trained in the school of three great generals: Claudius, Aurelian, and Probus. Nevertheless, this soldier and Barbarian was a man of genius.

He had hardly been elected when he was called upon to deal with civil war. Carinus, who had just been doing battle with the Jazygae, would not give up his claim to succeed his father. Both sides spent some months in preparing themselves for battle; and in the spring of 285 the two armies encountered each

86 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

other in Moesia. It is probable that Diocletian would in any case have been the victor even if the death of Carinus, who was killed by one of his officers, had not assured his triumph. The new civil war had however provoked in Europe once more one of the usual crises. The provinces, left for many months to their own devices, had occupied themselves with proclaiming new pretenders to the Imperial throne. A terrible insurrection of ruined peasants and insolvent debtors, the insurrection of the Bagaudæ, broke out in Gaul. The Barbarians had again started agitations on the frontier, and pirates were raiding the coasts of Gaul and Britain. Diocletian realized that the task he had undertaken was too formidable for a single emperor. Soon after his accession, as early as the second half of 285, he summoned one of his companions in arms, Maximian, born in Pannonia in the neighbourhood of Sirmium, to share the rule with him. Maximian was a valiant soldier, but he was only a soldier, and it is quite probable that at first Diocletian did not think of making him a colleague, but merely a trusty and faithful lieutenant. In

fact Maximian did not receive the title of Augustus but merely that of Cæsar. But his success in the campaign against the Bagaudæ, whose revolt in the course of a few weeks he drowned in blood, modified Diocletian's ideas and in 286 he gave Maximian the title of Augustus and equalized, in principle at all events, the powers of the two chiefs of the State, without in any way impairing the political and legislative unity of the Empire. It is true that each Emperor had his army, his prætorian prefect, and his budget, but the laws and coinage they held in common and the public acts contained the names of both. Diocletian's name, however, always stood first, and his will always preponderated, for, although his power was not greater than that of Maximian, his personal character and authority were vastly superior. Although the administrations and the military power of the two Augusti were in form distinct, they had no insurmountable limits, which is proved by their never hesitating to enter, whenever it seemed necessary, the territories which were respectively occupied by the other.

88 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

In fact there was now at the head of the Empire not only one emperor but two emperors, equal in power, just as, during many centuries there had been two consuls at the head of the Republic. This change which had already been attempted by Valerian at the beginning of the crisis of the third century became from henceforward a necessity. The Empire was menaced on all sides. Once more profiting by the revolt of the Bagaudæ, the Heruli, Burgundians, and Alemanni crossed the Rhine; moreover, the commander of the fleet, a certain Carausius, who had been ordered to harry the Saxon and Frankish pirates, came to a secret understanding with them. He was condemned to death by Maximian, but he succeeded in bringing about a revolt and assumed the title of Augustus in Britain. He took possession of the island and of some of the coast towns of Gaul. He created a powerful fleet under the protection of which he defied the authority of the two legitimate emperors. The situation was no less critical in the East where the Empire continued to be threatened as indeed it had been since the time of Valerian, that is to say since Rome had

lost Armenia, its principal defence against the new Sassanide Empire. It is evident, therefore, that two emperors, one in the East the other in the West, were in no way superfluous. While Maximian was succeeding in repulsing the new Germanic invasion on the Rhine, Diocletian was trying to re-enter Armenia, but by intrigue rather than by fighting. The civil war had weakened the Persian Empire, and it was now in such a state that King Bahram had sent ambassadors to Diocletian to beg for his friendship. Armenia was tired of the Persian domination and discontented with it. Tiridates, the heir to the Armenian throne was, very much against his will, living at Rome. Diocletian secretly encouraged and assisted him to conquer the Persian throne, and Tiridates, taking advantage of the Persian king's difficult situation and the discontent in Armenia, was able by a sudden stroke, cleverly prepared, to resume the possession of the kingdom of his fathers with hardly any resistance. Armenia found itself once more under the influence of Rome, and the Persian king, who was at the time not in a condition to make war, was forced to

90 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

resign himself to his fate and to accept the accomplished fact.

This success improved the situation in the East, although Egypt had begun to be agitated and a new enemy, the Saracens from the desert of Syria and Arabia, had made their appearance on Roman territory. In the West on the other hand, difficulties did not diminish. Maximian had not been able to get the better of Carausius who had enlisted a large army of Franks and Saxons. New threatening movements were taking place in Germania, where the Goths, Vandals, Gepidæ, and Burgundians were at war. In Eastern Europe, the Sarmatians were also in motion, and in Numidia and Mauretania the natives were once more unsettled. The two emperors did their best to make headway amongst all these difficulties, flying from one end of the Empire to the other, conferring the most extensive civil and military powers on this or that general, sometimes making a virtue of necessity. So they even acknowledged Carausius as a third Augustus as they were not able to conquer him. A few years' experience, however, sufficed to convince Diocletian and Maximian

that even two Augusti were not sufficient for the present task. In the year 293, Diocletian decided to subdivide still more the administration of the Empire. He gave to the two Augusti, two new official collaborators. These were, however, of an inferior grade: two Cæsars. One of the officers who was called to this high dignity was Galerius, an energetic and capable soldier of Dacian origin and with no refined culture. The other, Constantius, surnamed Chlorus on account of his pale complexion, was, on the contrary, descended through his mother from Claudius Gothicus. He came of a rich family; his character was gentle and his mind was cultivated. He was an aristocrat astray among the band of *parvenus* which governed the Empire. The provinces were distributed amongst the four emperors in the following manner: Diocletian kept for himself the more eastern portion of the Empire, Bithynia, Arabia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria; Galerius had Dalmatia, Pannonia, Moesia, Thrace, Greece, and Asia Minor; Maximian took Rome, Italy, Rhætia, Sicily, Sardinia, Spain, and all the rest of Africa. Constantius took Britain and Gaul. In accordance with

92 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the reason which had caused their elevation to the throne, the chiefs of the Empire were not to reside at Rome, but on the principal frontiers, Diocletian at Nicomedia in Bithynia; Galerius at Sirmium in Pannonia; Maximian in Milan; and Constantius at Treves in Gaul.

II

The multiplication of emperors, however, as we have already observed in speaking of Valerian, was merely a remedy of a geometrical character, whilst the disease of which the Empire was dying was of a moral nature. By itself such a remedy could be no more effectual at this moment of the Empire's history than it had been in the time of Valerian. It might even, on the contrary, have hastened the dismemberment of the Empire by inducing each of the Emperors to make himself independent. But Diocletian completed this division of the Empire by a thorough and organic reform of the whole supreme authority. This great reform was accomplished from 293 onwards, and was designed to give to the power of the four

Emperors a legality more secure and respected and at the same time to render the organs of government more powerful and more efficacious, augmenting in this way the strength and authority of the supreme control. Plunging resolutely along the path which Aurelian had entered upon somewhat timidly, Diocletian declared officially the principle of the divinity of the Emperor. The Emperors were "*Dei geniti et deorum creatores.*" Diocletian took the title of Jovius, Maximian that of Herculus. Their subjects and their army took the oath in their names, as heretofore they had done in the names of Jupiter or Hercules, and the divinity from which they and the Empire received their strength was precisely that of Mithras, the God of the Sun, the dispenser of thrones and empires.

This new divine majesty of the Empire was inculcated on the consciences of its subjects in tangible forms. The relation of these to the emperors and to all external acts of sovereignty became the objects of a ceremonial unknown to the first two centuries of our Era. The Emperor must wear a crown like the great Oriental monarchs, a crown with rays like

94 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the sun, which illuminates by its grace. His raiment and his shoes must be studded with precious stones. He is no longer, like Augustus, Trajan, or Vespasian, a simple mortal whom any one can approach at any day or at any hour, who talks familiarly with other men, and who keeps open house for all free citizens. It is necessary, in order to speak to him, to observe a special procedure, and it is absolutely obligatory, on coming into his presence, to prostrate oneself in a kind of adoration. Oriental absolutism triumphs finally over the ruins of Hellenism and Romanism which had been practically destroyed in the Empire by the great crisis of the third century.

It would not, however, have been of much use to assert a supreme authority based on divine prestige had this authority been weakened by the plurality of persons having the claim to exercise it. Although it was now divided amongst four sovereigns, the supreme power was, according to Diocletian, to remain a monarchy, that is to say a unity. How did he propose to solve the insoluble problem of building under four sovereigns a monarchy endowed with a strong unity? First, by sub-

ordinating the two Cæsars to the two Augusti, and assuring to himself as one of the Augusti the function of regular and supreme co-ordinator. The title of *Jovius* which he took for himself compared with that of *Herculius* accorded to Maximian indicated the position of superior and inferior. In addition to this and in order to make a unity, he applied the dynastic principle of Asiatic monarchy which had already in the first and second centuries percolated into the constitution of the supreme authority of the Roman Empire. Augusti and Cæsars form a single family. As Maximian had been adopted by Diocletian, the two Cæsars were adopted by the two Augusti; they repudiated their wives in order that they might marry the daughters of the Augusti who had adopted them as sons, a kind of political incest which reminds one of the Egyptian monarchy of the Pharaohs and the Ptolemies. By adding the religious and the dynastic principles to the principle of co-option one might have imagined that the most thorny of all the questions which concerned the supreme authority had been solved, that question which for more than three centuries had agitated

96 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the Empire: the question of succession. On the death of an Augustus, his Cæsar was to take his place and nominate another Cæsar in his turn, whom he would thus cause to enter the divine family of the masters of the world. It was something more than the assertion of authority that was required by the supreme power to cure the wounds of the Empire. It had also need of force, that is to say of clever, trustworthy, and obedient organs. Diocletian tried to infuse this new strength into the State by the creation of a complete bureaucratic system which should not depend on the Senate, as in the Asiatic monarchies, but exclusively on the Emperor-God. He did not perhaps neglect to notify the Senate of his own election to the throne, and of the successive elections of his colleagues, nor did he overlook certain forms consecrated by tradition; but as a political body it was disregarded. Its counsels might be listened to, but it was also possible to refuse to follow them. It had no longer any provinces to administer for these had all passed under the jurisdiction of the Emperor. The Senate was excluded from political action by the *Consis-*

torium principis, the new body which examined, as the Senate had formerly done, questions of a legislative character, and which was made up of all the great functionaries of the State. All the administration therefore now depended on the Emperor and on the *Consistorium principis* which acted as his direct supreme representative. The Consistorium was composed of a bureaucracy recruited without consideration of social rank, of descent, or of nationality, and in which all the subjects of the Empire, and very soon the Barbarians themselves, were admitted on terms of perfect equality.

III

From the point of view of the Greco-Latin traditions this was a great revolution. The Greek and Latin civilizations had both been founded on the double aristocratic principle of the accepted and half mystical inequality of the peoples and of the classes. This double aristocratic principle implied in its relations with external affairs the innate and eternal superiority of the Greeks or the Romans over the other peoples; and in its internal relations

98 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the innate and eternal superiority of the classes to whom belonged the privilege of commanding ordinary mortals. Nearly all the Greek and Latin governments were aristocratic, founded on the hereditary privileges of a small oligarchy which alone was qualified to govern. The attempts at really democratic government in which office might be held by men of all classes, including the middle classes and the populace, were rare and of short duration. The most celebrated of these attempts was that of Athens, but we know the catastrophe with which this terminated. Rome itself, even in the most active days of the Republic, was never truly democratic; and the Roman Empire until the time of Caracalla, that is to say until the beginning of the third century (less than a century before Diocletian), was still governed by what one might call the aristocracy of an aristocracy. The Senatorial and Equestrian orders, which were privileged to exercise all the high offices of the Empire, were an aristocracy recruited amongst the Roman citizens who, in their turn, nobles and plebeians, rich or poor, wise and ignorant, constituted together amongst the populations

of the Empire a second aristocracy endowed with special important privileges and subjected to a special penal code. The Greco-Latin civilization was founded then on the power of the *élite* or the chosen few, and that power itself rested on the idea that men and people are morally and mentally not equal but unequal. One of the consequences of this aristocratic character of the State and of the Greco-Latin society was the restriction of the sections of society from which the directing personnel could be drawn, and in consequence the limitation of the development of all the political and administrative organs. It is difficult in the present day to understand why Rome, even at the summit of her power, hesitated so often to extend her conquests and to enlarge her Empire. But an aristocracy is a close corporation which can neither improvise nor develop at will, and is therefore in nature essentially different from a bureaucracy which is recruited from all classes and from all nations and which can improvise and develop as it desires. That is why Rome was forced to keep a careful watch to guard against the extension of her Empire in such a

100 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

manner that the number of administrators and superior officers which could be furnished by her aristocracy should become insufficient; and for the same reason she always endeavoured to administer the Empire with as few functionaries as possible. Although we cannot cite exact figures, all that we know of the internal and external history of the Empire points indirectly to the fact that the sources from which the Roman administration were drawn were, up to the time of the end of the Antonine dynasty, relatively much circumscribed. The rule of the Imperial government was to govern with the minimum of functionaries just because it was an aristocratic government. At the epoch of which we are speaking, Christianity had already aimed a mortal blow at the ideal domain of the aristocratic organization of the ancient civilization, in affirming that all men, being sons of the same God, were equal in His sight. The doctrine of the moral equality of all men had already been enunciated by some of the great philosophers of antiquity; but Christianity was the only power that had succeeded in forcing this doctrine upon the universal

conscience with the result of destroying the true aristocratic government and of creating a modern democracy. Once the principle according to which all men were not equal but on the contrary unequal was destroyed in the consciences of the masses, aristocracy might remain a social convention accepted at certain epochs, as a convenience, but it ceased to be what it had been in ancient times: an organic and almost sacred form of civil society. This explains why in the Christian and Mussulman worlds aristocratic governments have always been weak and must be considered as pale imitations of the true great aristocracies of the ancient world.

Diocletian in his turn dealt a mortal blow to the aristocratic principle in the domain of politics by his reform of the administration. There was no doubt a connecting link between the two facts. The progress of Christianity was a necessary preparation for the reforms worked by Diocletian. It was, however, naturally, reasons of a political character which induced the Emperor to accomplish these reforms, and among these reasons the most important was the necessity of replacing the

102 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

aristocratic organizations of the Empire (which had been destroyed by the crisis of the third century) by a new organization suited to the military and political exigencies created by this same crisis. The lack of capable citizens and the exiguity of the social and political organizations compared with the extent of the Empire which it was necessary to govern, had been among the causes that had brought about the catastrophe to which during the previous fifty years the aristocracy of the Empire had succumbed. It became necessary to create an administration possessed of forces and organizations proportioned not only to the greatness of the Empire but also to the ever-growing effort that had to be made by the State to arrest the threatened course of universal dissolution. From whence was such an administration to be recruited when the aristocracy, which as early as the second century was insufficient, had now completely disappeared, unless it were possible to choose functionaries from all classes and all peoples?

The multiplication of offices and of functionaries high and low was another of the requirements of the great reform of Diocle-

tian. For the first time in the history of that Empire which had been founded by a military aristocracy, Diocletian separated the civil and military administrations and placed at the head of each province two functionaries with their respective staffs; *i.e.*, the *præses* or civil governor, and the *dux* or military governor. This reform had two ends in view: on the one hand, by dividing the power, to render more difficult the *pronunciamentos* of the provincial legions and the successive proclamation of new "emperors," which in the third century had become a veritable curse, and on the other hand to supplement the shortcomings of the military element, that was now recruited almost entirely in the least civilized provinces and frequently did not possess the qualities necessary for the civil government of an Empire which, although it was in a state of decadence, was still the heir of a great culture. Meanwhile another vital principle of the ancient civilization, namely, the unity of all public functions, was destroyed. It is also to be noted that the division of the military and the civil authority, which seems to us one of the most important steps in political progress

104 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

and in the history of civilization, appears for the first time in the history of the Roman Empire as an opportunist measure in an epoch of decadence. This is not all. Another reform was connected with the one above specified, and which might be defined as the parcelling out of the provinces. Diocletian did not, like Valerian, content himself with multiplying the number of the emperors; he multiplied the governors also, assigning to each a smaller territory so that he would be able to govern it more easily and also in order that he would have smaller forces at his disposal and would be less likely to become formidable. This is why, in the year 297, there were ninety-six civil governors of provinces instead of the fifty-seven that Diocletian had found at his accession.

At the same time, in order to prevent this parcelling out of the provinces from weakening the Empire and the strength of the central authority, he instituted the *Dioceses*. Up till this time the *Dioceses* had consisted of the fiscal and legal subdivisions of the provinces. The *diocese* of Diocletian was formed by grouping several provinces in one superior division

under the orders of a new magistrate, the vicar. The dioceses numbered twelve, five in the East which were called respectively Oriens, Pontica, Asiana, Thracia, and Moesia, and seven in the West named Pannonia, Britannia, Gallia, Viennensis, Italia, Hispania, and Africa. From this on, therefore, there were at the head of the Empire two Augusti and two Cæsars. Immediately below these in rank, there were twelve vicars at the head of as many dioceses, and on an equality with the vicars were the proconsuls, the governors of certain privileged provinces. Finally, below the *vicarii* were the *præsides* or sometimes the *consulares* or *correctores*, as the governors of the recently curtailed provinces were called. By the side of this civil hierarchy were the *duces*, military chiefs whose territorial powers were determined by military reasons and did not necessarily correspond with the boundaries of the provinces or the dioceses.

But the multiplication of the chiefs of the State, their subdivision into separate strategic centres, and the separation of the military from the civil power, were not sufficient to ensure the safety of the Empire. The ad-

106 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ministrative reform must be completed by the augmentation of the army. It was necessary to quadruple the bodyguards of the emperors, and to add new prætorian guards who became the *milites Palatini et Comitatusenses*. It was also necessary to increase the military effectives. Diocletian raised the number of soldiers from 350,000 to 500,000 and increased still further the proportion of officers. In order to strengthen more thoroughly each legion and to make sure of its fidelity, he reduced the number of effectives and multiplied the military tribunes. The plurality of the courts, the development of the central and provincial bureaucracy, and the augmentation of the army demanded much money and new sources from which supplies could be drawn. Diocletian provided for this with great resource and ingenuity. He began by decreeing a general revision of the value of land, a new survey register as we should say today, and gradually he introduced a new system of taxes, which was uniform for all the provinces but which was to take strictly into account the quality and yield of the land. For this end he created a new fiscal unity, called according to the

district "*jugum, caput millena, centuria*" which comprized lands of different kinds and sizes, but which taken together had an equal producing value and which consequently furnished equal contributions. For example, five "*jugera*" of vineyards or twenty "*jugera*" of arable lands of first quality, made one "*jugum*," whereas it required forty "*jugera*" of second quality or sixty of third quality to make up the same result. Further, whatever the nature of the crop, a larger production was required from a farm in the mountains than from one of the same extent in the plains. The collection of the taxes was regulated with the greatest care. The sum that the State imposed on a fiscal district which, as stated above, comprised a certain number of "*juga*" was notified to the "*decurions*" (the members of the local Senate attached to each town) who in their turn divided the amount due amongst the proprietors (*possessores*), excepting those who held only very small portions. The Decurions carefully supervised the collection of these taxes for they were held personally responsible if the amount collected fell short of the whole. Such a system of taxation was in appearance

108 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

perfect and the collection of the amount required seemed to be assured.

IV

Thanks to the reforms of Diocletian, the Roman Empire emerged with renewed life from the crisis of the third century. From this date, it became a vast *cosmopolis* of different races, governed by the Asiatic despotism of four sovereign gods, subject to an innumerable bureaucracy depending on these sovereigns and recruited without distinction of nationality or social rank. One cannot deny that thanks to these great political and administrative reforms the Empire recovered a part of its ancient prosperity. Diocletian succeeded in reconstituting, up to a certain point, the power and unity of the Empire. He first of all recovered Britain. Carausius had been killed by one of his officers, a certain Alectus, who had hoped to succeed him. Alectus was conquered and killed (296).

At Alexandria an insurrection, the object of which seemed to have been to set up a pretender in opposition to the legitimate sover-

belonging to Tiridates; Iberia (the present Georgia) became subject no longer to Persia but to Rome. The Roman Empire regained an excellent strategic frontier for the defence of Syria and Asia Minor and of its valuable allies in the East; and, finally, it concluded a peace which was to last for forty years.

During this time, Diocletian succeeded in establishing order in the interior of the Empire on a solid basis. Chronic anarchy came to an end under stable and regular government. Firmly guided by the two Augusti and the two Cæsars and by the sure will and vigorous thought of the senior of the Augusti, the ship of State spread her wings and sailed calmly on towards a smiling horizon. The meticulousness of the laws weighed upon her subjects, but served also to unite the citizens in a vigorous public discipline. Even the augmentation of the taxes seemed to be almost compensated by the new method of partition, by the rational manner of their collection, and by the renewal of the general prosperity. The new Imperial family enjoyed universal favour; its claim to divinity no longer caused antagonism and the fact won acceptance even from

112 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

the subject peoples; and the *felicitas sæculi* seemed to desire to crown the efforts of eighteen years of painful labour. The political and military crisis which had set in at the death of Alexander Severus seemed to be at an end.

V

Unfortunately there was a contradiction in Diocletian's policy which was secretly undermining the results of his labours. Diocletian had sought to save the Empire from the Barbarians who were attacking it from without by rendering it Barbarian within. In other words he had completed the destruction of Romanism and Hellenism which had been effected by the crisis of the third century by rendering it, so to speak, official and by a reorganization of the Empire founded upon principles opposed to those on which the Greek and Latin state had relied. Thus he had annihilated that which had been the soul, the strength, and the support of Hellenism and Romanism: the unity of public functions, the aristocratic organization of society, the political spirit, and polytheism. In other words

Diocletian had replaced a marvellous civilization—which for centuries had existed as a living unity in its various organizations of religion, family, State, and intellectual culture—by a system of institutions which, apart from some historical memories of the greatness of Rome, had no other spiritual principle than the Asiatic cult of a Sovereign God; a principle too new and too restricted to animate an immense mass like the Empire. The Empire remained as a vast body with a weak and feeble spirit seeking for a soul suitable to its size. The order instituted by Diocletian was without assured vitality and in this empty order two opposing currents were born and developed. One tended to resuscitate on the ashes of what still remained of ancient culture—literature, arts, philosophy, religion. This culture had been so rich and glorious that many were unable to persuade themselves even after so many calamities that it was really dead, and they hoped to be able at any cost to re-establish it in its ancient unity. The opposing group tried to fill the void in the re-established order by the new Christian doctrine which undermined the whole antique

114 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

conception of the life of the State. In definitely destroying the aristocratic structure of the ancient society, Diocletian had removed the chief barrier to the Christianization of the Empire; and however formidable might be the obstacles that remained they could not discourage a creed animated by such a powerful causation and a belief so strong in its conviction of its regenerating mission for the human race.

Placed between these two pressures, Diocletian and his colleagues endeavoured to favour the former without at the same time seriously antagonizing the latter. They tried to reinstate in the honour which they had formerly enjoyed the study of law, of literature, and of architecture, protecting the schools and the professors and recompensing and honouring the men of mark, instructors, architects, and others. It was for this reason that Diocletian summoned the grammarian Flavius and the orator Lactantius to Nicomedia, that he protected the law school of Beritus and even sought to attract to it young Arabs as students. So it was that Constantius Chlorus chose the celebrated orator Eumenius

as *magister memoriæ* and later nominated him professor in the celebrated school of Augustodunum. It was an official doctrine of the new *régime* which was set forth by Eumenius in most elegant pages; that letters are the sacred source of all the virtues and the best preparation for all careers even for that of the army. This solicitude for the intellectual life is easily explained. However decayed the Empire might find itself after so many calamities and with so many Barbarians in power, the longing persisted for that great culture which had created it and which throughout two centuries had been its characteristic and its ornament. It is, on the contrary, much more difficult to understand how the Empire had been able to live so long (till the year 303) at peace with Christianity which on so many questions of capital importance was completely at variance with the spirit of the reforms of Diocletian. The Christians constituted, however, at this time, an important portion of the administrators and of the Court officials; and it seems as if even the Empress and her daughter had had some intercourse with the new cult. Diocletian was too wise and too politic not to

116 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

understand how dangerous to the unity and peace of the Empire a persecution of the Christians would be and for a number of years he refused to treat the Christians as enemies. There was, however, at the Court a strong party of which Galerius was the chief, who did not approve this wise policy. This party prevailed in the end, as it seems by reason of the difficulties which Christianity created for the Imperial authority particularly in the army and with regard to military discipline. There were still to be found amongst the Christians fanatics who refused to render their military service, like that Maximilian who was executed at Theveste on the 12th of March, 295. At the same time, as the new religion spread, the number of Christians who resigned themselves to serving in the army became even larger.

But if the repugnance for war was on the wane, the difficulty of the divinity of the emperors remained insoluble. The Christians could not recognize and adore the sovereign as God, but the cult of the Sovereign God was the actual basis of military discipline as well as of Imperial authority. On this point

agreement was impossible and the conflict must inevitably break out one day or the other. In 302 an edict was issued dismissing from the army all Christians, and a year later, on February 24, 303 this was followed by another edict, which may be called the first really anti-Christian edict of Diocletian. This ordered the destruction of the temples and books of the Christians, the dissolution of their communities, and the confiscation of their goods, and it interdicted the assemblies of the Christians and excluded them from all public offices. The edict was relatively moderate as it contained no menace of death; but its proclamation was followed by great perturbations. A revolutionary movement broke out in Syria and the Imperial Palace at Nicomedia was burnt down. The enemies of the Christians accused them of being the authors of these disorders and on their side the Christians accused their enemies of exciting Diocletian's anger against them by provoking these riots themselves in order to bring the Christians into discredit.

It is impossible to decide which side was to blame. All we know is that these tumults

118 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

provoked a second edict much more severe than the first one. This edict ordered the imprisonment of the bishops, priests, and deacons if they refused to give up their sacred books which the Roman government considered as the mute repositories of the seditious doctrine. Diocletian was, however, evidently averse to pushing matters to extremities, so much so that in the second half of the same year on the 17th of September, 303, he took the opportunity on the occasion of the great public solemnity of the *Vicennalia*, that is to say the festivities held in honour of the twentieth anniversary of the Government of the two Augusti, to proclaim a sort of general amnesty. All the Christian prisoners who should declare that they were prepared to return openly to the old religion were to be set at liberty. The others who would not avail themselves of this clemency would, in consequence of their insane obstinacy, be treated for the future with even greater severity.

These documents form the most eloquent testimony of the power of Christianity. They give witness to Diocletian's hesitation in op-

posing himself to an enemy whom he knew to be both numerous and strong. As is always the case when an Empire finds itself at grips with a danger which it is not strong enough to eliminate, Diocletian had recourse to half measures which could have no other result than that of aggravating the evil. The Christians resisted, and the Empire was forced into using the rigorous measures from which at first it had abstained. At the end of 308 or 309, Diocletian became seriously ill and Galerius assumed the regency in the East. The Government now decided in favour of an uncompromising attitude and a fight to the death. Galerius and Maximian agreed in the promulgation of the last edict of persecution to which Diocletian decided to affix his signature. This edict made it obligatory for all the subjects of the Empire to sacrifice to the gods, under pain of suffering the personal penalties provided for recalcitrants.

This persecution lasted for eight years. But though it was more violent and more systematic than any of those previously undertaken by the Empire against Christianity, it was not of that implacably ferocious character

122 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Constantius, and placed on the shoulders of another officer, Severus, the purple robe of the Cæsars. Then began for Diocletian and Maximian that epoch in their lives known in history as the "*quies Augustorum*." It seems that during the eight years passed by Diocletian in the retirement of his great palace at Salona, a building set between the sea, the sky, and the mountains, his days divided between hunting and his humble kitchen garden, the Augustus, old and tired as he was, was not allowed to consider himself as a private person. To the last day of his life he kept all the titles and received all the homage due to his great past, and he remained for the new princes always "our master and our father." When his last hour came, the Senate gave to him the honours due to Divinity and accorded only to Emperors. Diocletian lived, however, long enough to see the growth of the conflict between the Empire and Christianity, a conflict which he had earnestly striven to avoid, and long enough to witness the final triumph of Christianity, which must have appeared to him as an even more sinister event than the conflict his wis-

dom had so much dreaded. This triumph marked the end of the ancient civilization, and was the inevitable result of policies and of actions which had been entered upon with a very different aim in view.

IV

Constantine and the Triumph of
Christianity

IV

CONSTANTINE AND THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

I

DIOCLETIAN had been tempted to reconstitute authority on three principles: the partition of the Empire; the Divinity of the Emperors; and Co-optation. According to his system the Empire was governed by an absolute authority, but this authority had not yet developed into the Asiatic form of monarchy, which was hereditary and based upon the dynastic principle. The son of the Emperor at this period was not his successor by right; but his successor became his son by adoption. It was in this way that at the last partition of the Empire, Diocletian had excluded from the succession the son of Constantius Chlorus, Constantine, and the son of Maximian, Maxentius. Diocletian's system

128 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

was, therefore, more complicated and refined than that of the Asiatic monarchies; it still retained something of the high aristocratic and republican civilization, from the death bed of which it had been developed. Diocletian had tried by this complicated organization, which did not leave the choice of a successor to that accident of an accident which constitutes birth, to respect the claims of intelligence and capacity; he endeavoured at the same time to defend each succession from the unbridled passions and armed combats of rival ambitions.

But the system was too complicated for the violent passions of the barbarous elements which had taken possession of the Empire; and it did not work. A year had not passed since the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian when Constantius Chlorus died, leaving as we have said a son, Constantine, whom Diocletian had excluded from power. Constantine, however, was an intelligent, energetic, and ambitious man, and his father being dead he thought he would force the hand of the Augusti by having himself proclaimed Cæsar by the soldiers (July 25, 306). He succeeded.

In order to prevent a civil war, Galerius, the most powerful of the Augusti recognized the "*fait accompli*" by giving to Constantine the title of Cæsar, and by giving to Severus the rank of Augustus. But the civil war which he had hoped to prevent by yielding in Gaul, broke out a short time afterwards in Italy in a more serious form, just on account of his having yielded in Gaul. Ancient Rome bore with a bad grace the position to which she had fallen of a mere provincial town. The absence of the Court and of the Emperor wounded the pride and at the same time injured the interests of the metropolis. The Senate had no longer any authority, the prætorians no longer counted for anything, the populace missed the grand displays and the attendant profits of the old days. Taking advantage of the pretext offered them by the order of Galerius for the taking of a new census, the population and prætorian bands rose and proclaimed as Augustus the son of Maximian, Maxentius, who lived not far from Rome and who had since the accession of Constantine (Oct. 27, 306) had hopes of securing a place on the Imperial throne. In order to confirm his authority,

130 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Maxentius summoned his father (who was not too well satisfied in his retirement) and forced him to resume the Imperial title. The tetrarchical system was destroyed. From now onward the Empire possessed six emperors, four Augusti and two Cæsars! This time Galerius would not acknowledge the "*fait accompli*," but instructed Severus to reconquer Italy. The name of Maximian, the former colleague of Diocletian was, however, still a power; the soldiers of Severus would not fight against their old general and preferred going over to the enemy. Severus fled to Ravenna, restored the purple mantle to Maximian, the same mantle with which Maximian himself had invested him such a short time before (307). A second attempt against Maxentius, directed by Galerius in person, was not more successful. Italy, discontented with the new régime and with her new masters, had declared herself solidly for Rome and for Maxentius. The towns shut their doors against the legitimate heir of the authority of Diocletian. Under these conditions, Galerius considered it prudent not to besiege Rome, which Aurelian had strongly fortified, and he

invited Diocletian himself to come to Carnuntum in Pannonia, hoping by the aid of his counsel and authority to be able to find a solution for the conflict which threatened the Empire with dismemberment.

The homage thus rendered to the founder of the tetrachate was indeed great. The result, however, was but inconsiderable. Even the creator of the tetrachate could not succeed in reorganizing it. He probably would have been able to do so if he would have consented to return to power. But he would not. Maximian, who had already quarrelled with his son, intervened at the Carnuntum conference and together with Galerius tried in vain to persuade him to resume the Imperial purple. The conference only decided that a new Augustus, an ancient comrade of Galerius, Licinianus Licinius, should be substituted for Severus and be given the government of Illyricum (November, 307); that Maxentius should return to private life, and that Maximian should be excluded from the Empire. The remedy was worse than the disease. Maxentius maintained himself in Italy despite the deliberations of Carnuntum. Maximian

132 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

would not lay down the purple robe; he tried to come to an agreement with Constantine, whom he married to his daughter Fausta, and endeavoured to find in him that support which he had not found in Maxentius. The nomination of Licinius created more difficulties, for it was proposed that Licinius should mount to the first place in the Empire without having passed through the grade of Cæsar, thus supplanting Maximinus Daza and Constantine. The two Cæsars protested in their turn. One of them had himself proclaimed Augustus by his troops, and the second demanded for himself an investiture similar to that of Galerius. At the beginning of the year 308, there were not only four Augusti besides Maxentius and Maximian; but further these four had no co-operation or subordination among themselves. All the efforts of Diocletian had been rendered null and void by the rival ambitions of the Augusti and the Cæsars, the unity of the Empire was again broken and the uncertainty of the principle of Authority on which the supreme responsibility rested—that mortal illness which since the time of Augustus had never allowed the Empire to rest—was engen-

dering a new crisis that could end only in bloodshed. The first victim was Maximian, who disappeared under obscure circumstances. It was said he conspired against his son-in-law; and it is certain that Constantine had him arrested at Marseilles and that two years afterwards (310) he caused him to disappear for ever regardless of the great services which he had rendered to the Empire. Then suddenly, in 311, in the midst of these disorders and intrigues three of the four legitimate Emperors, Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius promulgated an edict which suspended the persecution of the Christians.

II

How can we explain this abrupt change of a policy that had lasted for so many years? To what did the Christians owe the sudden end of the last persecution which they had to endure? While it is impossible for us to appreciate the personal motives which may have led the emperors to so important an act, or the part which religious conviction may have played in it we can better judge as to the

134 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

influence, which was due to the dangerous internal situation of the Empire. It was evident that the unanimity of the five Augusti could not last long, now that there was no longer a preponderating authority among them and that sooner or later a new civil war would break out. Maximinus Daza favoured the ancient cults and looked askance at Christianity. He even tried to secure for Paganism a stronger organization. It is, therefore, likely that the three other Augusti thought that by this decree they would procure for themselves for the eventualities of the future, the support of the Christian element, which had become so powerful. The Christians were reaping the benefit of the enfeeblement of the Empire, of which this new crisis of the supreme power was the cause.

Therefore, the decree of 311 is another of the many signs which were the precursors of a new civil war. It seemed, indeed, to have broken out immediately after the proclamation of the edict at the death of Galerius. Licinius and Maximinus prepared themselves at once to dispute the succession by force of arms. Later, however, they came to terms

and divided the East between them: Maximinus took Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt and Licinius the rest of the Oriental provinces from the Bosphorus to the Adriatic. The crisis was to break out shortly not in the East but in Europe. For at least two years, Constantine who had already distinguished himself in successful wars against the Franks and the Alemanni, was closely watching affairs in Italy. Maxentius was consolidating his forces and preparing the armies which were said to be destined to tear Gaul away from Constantine and Illyria from Licinius. He was drawing closer to Maximinus who was vigorously pursuing the persecution of the Christians in Syria and Egypt and the Provinces. In his turn Constantine was approaching Licinius to whom he gave his sister Constantia to wife. He made ready an army, and set up a system of secret service in Italy which was to prepare his way so that he might not repeat the errors of Galerius and Severus and enter the peninsula as if he were passing through an enemy country. When he thought himself ready, at the beginning of the year 312, he crossed the Alps near Mont Cenis with about 50,000 men

136 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

of whom about half were chosen and proved legionaries. He broke through the first resistance with ease, took possession of the valley of the Po, and proceeded to march upon the Metropolis. Maxentius had not stirred from Rome, relying upon the strong position of the town, on his numerous armies, and on all the other obstacles which had brought to nought the expeditions of Severus and Galerius. But Constantine had better prepared his expedition, and a part of the population, namely the Christians, were on his side. He was therefore not delayed on his way by the difficulties and resistance which Severus and Galerius had not been able to surmount. When Maxentius knew that Constantine, after a victorious march, was approaching Rome at the head of a strong army, and that the population, tired of the present government, were in Constantine's favour, he realized that he could not remain shut up behind the Aurelian walls, and he sallied forth from the town prepared to give battle in the open field. The battle took place near the present Ponte Milvio and ended in the defeat of Maxentius. He himself and a large part of his army per-

ished in the river Tiber (25 October, 312). On the following day the conqueror made his triumphal entry into Rome. The Prætorian Corps was disbanded and their camp, where so many Emperors had been made and unmade, was broken up. It must have been satisfactory to the Senate to hear the deferential words which Constantine addressed to them that day, promising almost complete restoration of their ancient prerogatives. He received in return the title of first Augustus and the honour of a triumphal arch, which today still stands adorned with the spoils of the arch of Trajan.

III

The conquest of Italy, which was to be completed in a short time by the subjugation of Africa, profoundly disturbed the balance of power between the three Emperors and jeopardized the position of Maximian. Licinius and Constantine met at Milan at the beginning of the year 313 to resolve the problems emanating from the new situation. We do not know what were the questions treated of in the new conference. The inadequate his-

138 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

torical tradition of that epoch has transmitted nothing to us. It is not, however, difficult to suppose that whilst Licinius consented to the new aggrandizement of Constantine's power, he obtained from him at the same time his own liberty of action against Maximinus. This congress of Milan about which we know so little is, however, famous in history for another reason, namely the new edict of tolerance in favour of the Christians which is considered as the definite triumph of Christianity. In reality it was not really a question of the triumph of Christianity, for this edict does not recognize the new religion as superior to all the others, nor as the only religion, nor as the official religion of the State. The edict contents itself with confirming the previous edict of 311 in a more emphatic manner: It concedes again to the Christians the liberty that had been accorded to them two years previously. It removes certain last surviving restrictions and offers a new practical proof of the will of the Augusti by ordering the restitution to the Christian churches of the goods sequestrated during the great persecution. The crisis of the supreme power con-

tinued to produce its effects, from which came benefits to the Christians. The two Emperors accentuated their favourable intentions towards the Christians in proportion to the contrary policy which Maximinus had adopted in the Eastern provinces where he was carrying on the last persecutions. Christianity and Paganism became, in the hands of the rival Emperors, weapons for civil war. It is unlikely that the two Emperors could have had any idea of the enormous importance that their edict would assume in the eyes of history, and it is probable that amongst all the questions discussed, this one was considered of only relative importance in comparison with other problems in which history was destined to take no further interest. But when have statesmen engaged in a struggle for power understood the real object of their strife or the true significance of their acts? They perceive and take an interest only in the petty game on which they are engaged. And in truth Maximinus saw at once and rightly interpreted the play of his adversaries and did not for a moment hesitate to act. Licinius was still in Italy, when Maximinus was invad-

140 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ing the Balkan Peninsula, taking first Byzantium, then Perinthus, and pushing on towards Adrianople. Licinius was obliged to hasten there and place himself on the defensive. But a great battle which took place not far from Perinthus about 18 miles from Heraclea (30th April, 313) changed the destiny of the war. Maximinus was beaten; he fled to Cilicia and there died.

IV

Shortly before, Diocletian had died at Salona, having lived to see the catastrophe which had overwhelmed his system. The tetrarchy which he had organized was henceforth reduced to a diarchy, which rested now only on the balance of power. How long would that balance last? Mistrust, ambition, rivalry, and all the violent passions of that semi-barbarous epoch, no longer dominated by any principle of authority, combined to undermine it. Indeed it was not long before war broke out between the two surviving Augusti. Constantine, on some pretext unknown, seems to have taken the initiative. Licinius was beaten at Cibalæ in Pannonia on

the Save on the 8th of October, 314 and then again in Thrace. Neither the one nor the other were decisive victories. Constantine realized that in order to defeat his rival completely, it would be necessary to carry the war into the heart of the East, to engage in the campaign the greater part of his armies and to ungarrison the frontiers which were in a perpetual state of danger. He had not sufficient forces at his command for such an enterprise and he therefore preferred an agreement. On his side, Licinius, who had been beaten, was prepared to negotiate. Constantine received Illyria, Greece, a part of Moesia, Macedonia, Epirus, Dardania, Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Noricum. Having survived this first attack, the balance was readjusted between the two Emperors and maintained for about nine years. For nearly nine years the Empire retained the uncertain form of a diarchy in which the power of the two Emperors was limited only by mistrust and reciprocal fear.

It was, however, only a truce. Diocletian's system once destroyed by the absence of an Augustus who could dominate it by his

142 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

authority, the ambitions of the two Emperors and the two Courts coincided with the necessity of things to urge the Empire on to an undivided and hereditary monarchy.

During these nine years the two Emperors made themselves ready in every possible way for the decisive struggle. They prepared armies, sought alliances, and above all exploited the struggles between the moribund old religion and the new faith which was supplanting it with so much energy. Constantine endeavoured with all his might to secure the support of the Christian element; Licinius, out of opposition, changed his previous policy and relied on the Pagan element. When the war broke out in 323, Constantine not only represented the West against the East, but he also carried with him the prayers of the Christians against his rival, who was looking to the Pagans for confidence and sympathy. We know how victory smiled on the champion of Christianity. On the 3d of July, 323, the two armies met on the plain of Adrianople; Licinius fought with great energy but was beaten. He shut himself up in Byzantium, which barred the landward road to Asia,

whilst his powerful fleet blocked the way by sea. Constantine's fleet was, however, commanded by the Emperor's eldest son, Crispus, who, although still very young, had already distinguished himself in the previous operations against the Franks and had received the title of Cæsar. Crispus beat back the army of Licinius at the entrance to the Hellespont, and Licinius then abandoned Byzantium and tried to bar Constantine's road to Asia Minor. Surrounded by the enemy he was obliged to accept battle near Chrysopolis (the Scutari of today) where he was once more beaten. He then gave himself up to his conqueror who, although he had promised to save his life, executed him the following year. With this victory perished the last vestiges of the system of Diocletian and hereditary monarchy could now reign supreme over the whole Empire, the unity of which had been reconstituted. This time, the fruit appeared to be ripe, and the long evolution of Augustus' aristocratic republic drew to its close. Constantine would have the glory of creating the dynasty which would govern the vast Empire as the Ptolemies had governed Egypt. All the ele-

144 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ments of success seemed at last to exist. The repugnance of the Greco-Latin spirit was dead. There was no longer any institution strong enough to offer resistance. The dynasty was ready because Constantine had overthrown all the other chiefs whose ambition might have opposed his own. The Empire needed a central authority single and strong, solid and permanent. But when all the other difficulties were set aside, the new one to which we have already alluded still surged up more formidable than any of the others, that of Christianity. In the decisive struggle with Licinius Constantine had relied upon the Christians, and having conquered with their aid he could no longer govern without being in accord with them and respecting their beliefs. The Christian apologists were much more in the right than many modern historians when they said that Constantine's victory over Licinius was the decisive victory of Christianity over Paganism. After that victory the Christian religion was already in fact if not by law the official religion of the Empire; and it was not long before it became so legally. Constantine could, therefore, in-

troduce into the Empire all the institutions and ceremonials of Asiatic monarchies, except the doctrine of the divinity of the Sovereign, because such a piece of political idolatry would have been held in horror by all the Christians. He had been able to constitute a stronger power than that of Diocletian by avoiding the partition of the supreme authority between four sovereigns, but he was obliged at the same time to renounce the principle of the divinity of the Emperor out of regard for the tenets of the Christians, and in this respect his government was weaker than that of Diocletian.

An absolute and hereditary monarchy is a very convenient political system because it entails a simple solution of two of the greatest problems which present themselves before every government, the problems of unity and continuity. But amongst the inconveniences which it represents there is one specially serious: namely, the difficulty which arises in justifying the attribution of such unlimited powers to one family as an hereditary privilege. The ancients, who in their political conceptions often gave proof of a naïve

146 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

audaciousness and of a logic which we lack, had found a radical solution to this difficulty when they made their sovereigns quite divine. Being gods, kings could enjoy privileges which would have been absurd if they had been accorded to mere men. Christianity destroyed this justification of a monarchical power, which though somewhat gross was excellent for simple souls; and this explains why the political problem after the introduction of Christianity became much more difficult and complex than it had been before. Constantine was the first victim of this new experience. If ever there was an Emperor who made supreme efforts (after his victory over Licinius) to reconstitute the unity of the Empire, to restore to it a coherent and powerful government, to save the ancient civilization, its culture, its art, and its laws, it was Constantine.

How varied, far reaching, and persevering his work was! A brief summary will give some idea of the things accomplished. He remodelled definitely the political and administrative system of Diocletian and endeavoured thereby to strengthen the State.

Although the sovereign was no longer officially considered as a god, the Court became quite Oriental; the pomp of ceremonial, the complication of etiquette, the luxury of the courtiers, the mystery in which the Emperor was shrouded, were largely increased. The great dignitaries, to whom a numerous following of dependents were attached, were minutely classified and were given titles. These were the "*quæstor sacri Palatii*" who received the petitions and prepared and countersigned the laws which the "*Consistorium*" was to discuss and the Emperor to make public; the "*magister officiorum*" a sort of minister of the Royal House, who directed the members of the police, the palace guards, the employees of the central administration; the two ministers of finance, the "*comes sacrarum largitionum*" and the "*comes rerum privatarum*." The new council of the Emperor, the "*Consistorium*," also attained a greater and more definite form than under Diocletian. Its ordinary members were the holders of the great offices; its extraordinary members varied according to contingencies. They intervened only either when they were asked so to do, or when they happened to be

148 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

at the place where the "*Consistorium*" was gathered together, or when they had to make reports on their return from some mission. Under the second category were also the prætorian præfect, and the two masters-general, the "*magistri militum*," the supreme commanders of the infantry and cavalry who attended, it seems, only on exceptional occasions.

Under the ministers of the Imperial household and of the "*Consistorium*" was the bureaucracy created by Diocletian and considerably increased by Constantine. The augmentation of the bureaucracy is one of the phenomena which accompanied the decadence and dislocation of the Empire. The four bureaus of the Imperial Chancery, which existed in the second century, changed their names. The "*ab epistulis*" became the "*scrinium epistularum*," the "*libellis*" the "*scrinium memoriae*," the "*cognitionibus*" the "*scrinium libellorum*," the "*memoria*," the "*scrinium depositionum*." The change of names reveals a new system. Instead of an official with a few secretaries, who were often freedmen or slaves, we have a fully equipped bureau with

a numerous staff and a complete and complicated hierarchy. A "*scrinium*" is a hierarchical staff which served as a model for the absolute monarchies in the early years of modern history.

The provincial organization was still that of Diocletian. Instead of four tetrarchs there was now one Emperor, but the administrative divisions created by Diocletian still existed. The Empire was divided into two or three, or possibly even four, sections at the head of which were placed the prætorian præfects, who now that the prætorian guard had disappeared had become the chief civil and judicial officers. They had under their orders the "*vicarii*," and these again controlled the "*præsides*" or the "*consulares*" or the "*correctores*." The number of provinces into which the Empire was divided seems again to have been augmented and for the same reasons which had also caused Diocletian to reform them.

We ask ourselves what had become, during this time, of the old magistrature and the Roman Senate? Rome still kept her Senate, her Consuls, her Prætors, her ediles and tribunes. But these great offi-

150 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

cials now enjoyed little beyond municipal responsibilities.

The organization of the army remained that of Diocletian but it included reforms which partly exaggerated and partly perverted their original character. The effectiveness of each legion continued to be reduced; the military command was sharply separated from the civil; even that of the cavalry was divided from the infantry just as the supply and pay departments were separated from the transport department. The whole army was divided into two great sections. The first was represented by the "palatine militia" ("*domestici, protectores scolares*") which may be compared with the ancient prætorian guard. It contained a fifth or sixth part of all the effectives and formed a sort of reserve army which followed the Emperor on important expeditions. The second section was represented by the line regiments or "*comitatenses*" drawn from the citizens and barbarians and scattered about in little garrisons in the towns of the interior. Lastly, the third section consisted of the frontier troops—the "*riparienses*" or "*castriciarii*" or "*limitanei*"—who were

mainly recruited from the ranks of the Barbarians and from among the lowest of the people. They were inferior to the "*comitatenses*"; their service lasted longer, and their pay was smaller. They remained permanently in the frontier zones, or in castles, fortresses, or intrenched camps. A considerable part of these troops were taken from the local colonists. It is easy to discover the fault of this system; while the "*corps d'élite*," the palatine militia, was composed largely of parade troops, the nerves of the army, the "*comitatenses*," was subdivided into little kernels and dispersed amongst the small towns of the interior, their duty being to maintain public order. Its functions were therefore rather those of a corps of "*gendarmerie*" than of a regular army. Besides this, in all three sections of the army, Barbarians abounded. Constantine opened to them even the doors of the palatine militia. Finally, he accomplished one of the most audacious acts it was possible for the chief of the Empire to devise. He adopted Antony's design, and, removing the capital from Rome, transported the seat of empire to the shores of the Bosphorus.

His activity was large, strong, profound, and rich in ingenious ideas. It was the expression of a political and administrative genius of the first order. But it is also a clear proof that the monarchy itself was less strong than when it rested on the system of Diocletian. One can define Constantine's policy by saying that in order to conquer and to exercise alone absolute power he had, by leaning for support upon Christianity, weakened the foundations which Aurelian and Diocletian had endeavoured to consolidate with the Oriental cults. For what reason should Constantine have complicated still further the ceremonial and multiplied the bureaucracy if he had not felt that his government was more feeble than that of his predecessors although he had concentrated all its powers in one hand? In the same way we cannot explain how a soldier and a statesman of so much genius could have split up and immobilized his army in so many different garrisons in the interior far from the frontiers, without admitting that from henceforward the army was required for

preserving internal order by force as the only means remaining of combating the many threatening causes of dissolution, rather than for defending the Empire. Nor can we explain the willingness of Constantine to open the ranks of the legionaries to the Barbarians without realizing that he felt himself powerless to fight against the repugnance of the new Christian society for a military life. Finally, it is impossible to explain otherwise than as a sign of the waning weakness of the Empire the removal of the capital and the founding of Constantinople. Numerous as were the causes of that great event, the principal one must be sought in the decadence of the Western provinces which had been devastated by the Barbarians, impoverished and depopulated. Even as the development of the Western provinces, and especially of Gaul, had fixed the seat of government in Italy, in the same way it was now drawn towards the East, that is to say towards the richer provinces which, now that the Western world was falling into ruins, were more thickly populated and less affected by the crisis of the moment. Constantine chooses the position with extra-

154 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

ordinary insight, for Constantinople is the ideal situation for the capital of an Empire which is half in Asia and half in Europe. What, however, does the movement of the capital of the Empire to the Bosphorus indicate if not a declaration that the task of Rome in the West was accomplished and that a new era had dawned?

Constantine had little better success either in his attempts to ensure through the dynastic principle the unity and continuity of the supreme power, or in his efforts to resolve the problem of the principle of supreme authority which had tormented the Empire since the time of Augustus. The dynasty he wished to found was at once undermined by discord, suspicion, and jealousy. The civil wars between the generals by which the Empire had been afflicted up to this time were succeeded by obscure dynastic tragedies. It was in the family of the founder himself that the long history of palace revolutions of which Constantinople was destined to be the theatre for so many years first broke out. Already in 326, for unknown reasons, Constantine had caused his son Crispus—the conqueror of the

Franks and Licinius—to be murdered, and shortly afterwards he disposed of, in the same way, his second wife Fausta, the daughter of Maximian. In 333, he carried out a less tragical but more significant act unmasking the utter weakness of the whole political fabric which he had built. He distributed the Empire between his three sons and one of his nephews. He assigned Spain, Gaul, and Britain to Constantine; Asia, Syria, and Egypt to Constantius; Italy, Illyricum, and Africa to Constans; and the title of Augustus to all three. To his nephew Dalmatius he gave, with the title of Cæsar, Thrace, Macedonia, and Achaia, and, finally, to a brother of this latter, Hannibalianus, he assigned the vacant throne of Armenia and the regions bordering the Pontus, with the title of King of Kings. What good end then had been served by the long struggle and all the blood he had shed in order to overthrow the tetrarchy of Diocletian if he were only going to reconstitute this in a more feeble manner and in a more dangerous form? The truth was that even Constantine had not the power necessary for the solution of that terrible question: the legal principle

156 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

of supreme authority. The dynastic principle, despoiled of its divine character was too feeble, uncertain, and oscillating for the purpose, and in this it resembled all the other systems that the Empire had tried. Constantine understood that he did not possess the authority or strength which would have enabled him to control the ambitions of various members of his family, so that he might transmit his power to one alone amongst his children. He preferred, therefore, to divide the Empire, cherishing the illusion that he would thus more easily secure its tranquillity in satisfying all the rival ambitions which he could not suppress.

VI

This partition of the Empire, however, though it annulled the essential part of Constantine's work, was not the most serious danger. It broke only the material unity of the Empire! Much more serious were the dangers with which the moral unity was menaced by the heresies of triumphant Christianity. There is no doubt (in fact Constan-

tine himself admits this in an edict which we shall quote later on) that he had approached and favoured Christianity with the idea of reconstituting the moral unity of the Empire so shattered by the struggle between Paganism and Christianity. Constantine was still too much a politician of the old school not to consider (as was the fashion of Roman thought) religion as a political instrument. Now that Christianity was henceforward to replace Paganism, it was the part of political wisdom to accelerate the Christianization of the whole Empire. But Christianity was not a religion which would serve as a political instrument in the hands of the State as was the case with the various Pagan religions. It had an independent doctrine and morality of its own which no State could modify for its political ends. Constantine did not fail to perceive this, when as soon as by his aid Christianity had triumphed, heresies long kept within bounds by persecutions broke out as a force destructive of peace and order. It is not an exaggeration to say that Constantine, in seeking to reconstitute the unity of the Empire by the aid of Christianity, introduced a new

158 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

disintegrating force, namely, theological disputes. The history of the great Arian heresy furnishes a luminous proof of this fact. A priest of Alexandria, Arius by name, had taken upon himself to maintain that the Christ or the *Logos*, to employ theological language, had been created by God out of nothing, like other living creatures and not from a divine substance. That He had been created voluntarily and that on account of His merits He had been adopted as the Son of God without that adoption securing for Him any part of divine essence. In this way Arius came to deny the identity of the three persons of the Trinity, and the divinity of Christ, and risked making the Redeemer a mere human being endued with extraordinary qualities and almost divine. This heresy was no novelty; other heresies analogous to it had preceded it by approximating Christianity to the Paganism of the third century, a creed which had accepted the idea of one God of whose attributes all the other divinities would be mere incarnations. In the East, where philosophical culture and the passion for dialectics were still active, the Arian doctrine raised a

formidable storm, and the divinity of Christ became the object of a terrible struggle. The Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, supported by the votes of a Synod composed of a hundred bishops, had, in the year 321, expelled Arius from the Christian community. Arius was, however, not alone. The simplicity of his doctrine rendered it more accessible for ordinary minds than the opposite doctrine of the Trinity which was obscure and difficult. The sympathy which he found in the Pagan neoplatonism which was so much spread abroad in the East, the hatred and the rancour left by preceding heresies, the numerous discords which divided the Christian world, soon secured for Arius a numerous if not very choice following. Synods began to oppose themselves to Synods, men's minds caught fire, theological disputes were followed by brawls and blows and disturbances in the streets. The security which they enjoyed after the triumph of Christianity favoured also the explosion of bad passions amongst the Christians. It was not possible for Constantine, who had been strengthened in his efforts to reconstitute the unity of the Empire by the support of the

160 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Christians, to accept with indifference a religious crisis which was becoming a civil war. He was himself caught in the toils of these theological disputes. What his political sense thought of them is told in a letter which he addressed to the dissentient Christians.

"I had proposed to lead back to a single form the idea which all people make to themselves of the divinity because I feel strongly that if I could have induced men to come into unison on that subject as was my hope, the conduct of public affairs would have been much facilitated. But, alas, O Divine Goodness, what news has broken so cruelly upon my ears and pierced my heart! I hear that there are more dissensions among you than there were formerly in Africa. And the cause of these seems to me very trifling and quite unworthy of so many fierce contests. Thou, Alexander, didst wish to know what thy priests were thinking upon a point of law, even on a portion only of a question in itself *entirely devoid of importance*, and thou, Arius, if thou didst have such thoughts thou shouldst have kept silence. . . . There was no need to make public these questions or the

replies to them, since they are problems which there is no call to discuss, which idleness alone suggests, and whose only use is to sharpen men's wits. Is it just, that on account of vain words, you should let strife loose between brothers? . . . These are silly actions worthy of inexperienced children and not of priests or reasonable men. *Restore to me, I pray you, my quiet days and my nights without anxiety* so that I may for the future know the charm of the pure joy of life."

The meaning of this letter is clear. Constantine, who regarded religion as a political instrument for maintaining order in the State, considered the fury of these discussions as mere foolishness. A religion which, instead of assisting the Emperor to govern, created difficulties for him, seemed to his faithful interpretation of Roman thought a monstrous absurdity. Taking advantage of the authority which he enjoyed amongst the Christians, Constantine summoned a grand council which was to decide the matters at issue. In the spring of 325, more than 250 bishops, the majority coming from the Eastern provinces, met at Nicæa. Constantine inaugurated the Council

162 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

with a comparatively modest speech. He said that by re-establishing concord in the Church the Assembly would have accomplished an act agreeable to God and rendered a great service to the Emperor. The Council was presided over by one of his secretaries, the Bishop Osius, an opponent of Arianism, and the imperial influence was displayed entirely on that side. Arius was therefore once more rebuffed. The Council decreed that Christ had not been made out of nothing, and that He was not different from His Father. On the contrary He had been begotten by Him "from the essence of the Father," "Very God of very God," and that He was co-substantial with Him.

But the illusion of having thus reconstituted the moral unity of the Empire lasted but a short time. That which to the Roman political sense of Constantine seemed a foolish madness, was in reality something much more profound; it lay so deep that even the weight of the Emperor's whole authority could do nothing against it. Condemned by the Council of Nice, Arius had gone into exile, but Arianism was widespread and powerful; it had

devoted friends even at Court, among whom was Constantia, the Emperor's own sister. Arius therefore did not give up the struggle. By taking advantage of the errors of his adversaries and by moderating his doctrine, he and his partisans succeeded in regaining Constantine's favour and in persuading him that a reconciliation was still possible. The Emperor, who was always animated by the desire of re-establishing the moral unity of the Empire, endeavoured to bring about such reconciliation, but he came into collision with an uncompromising opposition under the leadership of Athanasius, the new Bishop of Alexandria. This persistent antagonism of the Athanasians threw Constantine at last entirely onto the side of Arius. The Imperial favour gave courage to the Arians who, in 335, succeeded in having Athanasius condemned at the Council of Tyre. Athanasius in his turn was exiled to Gaul, and all his best-known partisans were pursued and dispersed; Arius remained triumphant and the Court was invaded by Arians who became in almost all the East the dominant part of the Church. The adverse party did not, however, disarm,

164 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

and from this moment an immense struggle, carried on with implacable fury, disturbed the whole Empire, adding a new cause of weakness to those which already existed.

VII

How can we explain this almost inconceivable phenomenon? To modern men, as to Constantine, these theological disputes which played such a great part in the history of Christianity seem an almost inconceivable folly. How was it that all the force and wisdom of the Imperial authority were powerless against what seems to us a kind of delirium? How could men for centuries hate each other, pursue each other, massacre each other, and bring about the ruin of a great Empire, merely on account of doctrines so abstruse and subtle? For to us who no longer see what was hidden behind these formulas, the object of all these disputes appears only to have been words. But to judge in this manner is to fail to understand one of the greatest dramas of the history of humanity. And with what a prodigious vitality do these obscure theologi-

cal struggles become endued, if we replace them in the midst of the appalling disorder of the great Empire which was crumbling to its fall! There was no longer any solid basis of authority to sustain the social order; neither the ancient Greco-Latin principle nor the aristocratic and republican principle, consecrated by a polytheism which had also been undermined, nor the new Asiatic and monarchical system, had succeeded in taking solid root. The theological struggles of that epoch represent only a titanic effort to constitute an iron intellectual discipline, a doctrine undisputed and indisputable, capable of resisting all the assaults made on it by interests and passions, at a moment when political authority was still weak and divided, and when all traditions had been overthrown by revolutions, by wars, by the mingling of classes, and of peoples, and by the infiltration of the Barbarians. If everything else were unstable in this world, laws, traditions, the force of the State, the private fortunes and interests of men and their families, let human thought at least remain firm and stable, irrevocably fixed in that doctrine which God had revealed to

166 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

men by means of the Messiah and the Apostles and which was transmitted in an authentic form "*in æternum*" in the sacred books. We can explain and understand many, if not all, the great struggles of orthodoxy against heresy, if we realize that, behind theological questions apparently subtle and theoretical, there was hidden the far more serious question of the unity and stability of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and that that unity and stability was the last foundation of order in the world which, because of the impossibility of finding a sure and certain principle of authority, was falling into disintegration. Arianism is a particularly clear and instructive example of this truth. In separating Christ from God and making Him merely one of God's emanations or manifestations, Arianism tacitly admitted that other emanations and manifestations might follow. Even as God had raised the Christ out of nothing and adopted Him, He might, at His own will, raise up other redeemers out of nothing and adopt them. The book of revelation was, therefore, not closed, it might be continued in new volumes; other Messiahs might still appear,

and the Christian doctrine change itself into a continual development, such as was later conceived by certain of the most radical of the Protestant sects, of which Arius was really the precursor. But this continual change of doctrine must have appeared as a criminal folly to those enlightened and profound spirits who, in the midst of the universal dissolution of the laws, manners, and states, realized how much men, despairing of this eternal mobility of all around them, felt the need of something solid and fixed and indestructible, to which they could cling. That was the chief reason why so many minds were opposed to the Arian heresy and were even prepared to defy exile and death rather than subscribe to its tenets. On the other hand, if the Christ were indeed the Son of God, co-substantial with His Father, very God born from the true God, without violating the unity of monotheism, the mystery of the Incarnation was unique and definite for all eternity; another Messiah would never come, the book of revelation was closed for ever, and humanity from henceforward had found the indestructible foundation of eternal truth on which to build moral

168 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

and social order, which was contained in the two Testaments; on the one condition that they interpreted these rightly.

It is not difficult on these grounds to explain the terrific ardour with which were carried on the great theological struggles, through which little by little this doctrine was developed. What was the aim of the great founders and defenders of orthodoxy? It was to unite and fix belief on the basis of Revelation and the other sacred books, with all the strength of thought, and above all with the aid of that special instrument which is to be found in dialectics. But thought is one of the most mobile elements of the universe, and, though dialectics form a powerful instrument, it is a very uncertain one, because it can become the slave of every passion even of those that sow trouble and disorder in men's minds and in the world. Already Greek philosophers had made use of higher thought, far more for the purpose of destroying than for supporting the beliefs and traditions of the ancient world, and in order to substitute for these the eternal fluctuation of passions and interests, disguised by ingenious sophisms. Besides this if it is

repugnant at any time to man's thought to subject itself to a strong and serious discipline, it is still more so at a moment of political and social anarchy. To endeavour to reconstitute order amidst the anarchy of an immense Empire crumbling into ruins, by beginning to discipline thought, was to commence the work at the most difficult end, and, following the line of greatest resistance, to offend all the passions which anarchy unchains and seeks to prolong, because it is by these that it lives.

VIII

The task was essential in order to save a part of the world from a catastrophe which would have annihilated the ancient civilization, but it was the most difficult which could have presented itself to the human spirit. We must not then be surprised that during this titanic defence of orthodoxy so many men should have arisen within the Church remarkable for their moral and intellectual eminence and whose memory the Church holds sacred. The true grandeur of nature and of human genius appears only in the time of crisis and

170 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

in the face of difficult and almost impossible undertakings. But in connection with this superhuman effort to unify truth by the aid of dialectics and eloquence, in connection with this attempt to employ the most powerful instruments of the ancient culture for a new end, what efforts were made by Constantine to save the remains of ancient culture? In that direction also Constantine wisely followed in the footsteps of Diocletian. In the new capital of the Empire he founded what we should call a university, where professors employed by the State taught the Greek and Latin language, literature, rhetoric, philosophy, and law, and trained future officials for the Empire. There have come down to us also many of Constantine's laws securing privileges and advantages and ensuring the future of doctors, grammarians, and professors of *belles-lettres*, in all the towns of the Empire. But these efforts were sterile. Bureaucratized in official teaching, having no longer, in the last agonies of Paganism, a vital task to accomplish, the ancient literatures and philosophies dried up in the mediocrity of the professional professors, who tried to live and make a posi-

tion for themselves at the expense of the genius of the past; while the new genius, comprising the really great minds, despising official protection, turned away from state-managed instruction and gave themselves up to the vital work of their epoch. One of the greatest books of antiquity, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine preserves for us a graphic picture of this spiritual crisis of the ancient culture. St. Augustine was endowed with all the necessary gifts for becoming a great writer: imagination, sentiment, style, language, and a philosophical spirit. The dialectic force in him was equivalent to his power of imagination, the play of fancy and of sentiment was equal to the depth of this thought. This was the man who had become one of those official professors of literature, whom, since the time of Diocletian, the Empire paid and honoured so that they might keep alive the tradition of ancient literature. For once the official teaching had laid its hand on a real genius. But that genius has left us an unforgettable description of the miserable life which he led as he carried on his work as professor in Carthage, in Rome, and in Milan, of the anxious discontent which

172 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

devoured him, of the frantic working of his great talent in the emptiness of that culture which was now exhausted and squandered in the conventional frame of official teaching. One day in a village near Milan the light suddenly dawned on that great soul disgusted with the profession to which a dying civilization was condemning him. The professor of literature abandoned his desk, threw away the dead books, went down like a brave diver into the depths of the sea, into the theological abysses of grace, predestination, and free will, to lay the foundations of the first piers which were to support the great bridge across which Europe was to make the long and difficult passage from the ancient civilization to the modern. Constantine's work was not altogether nullified, but it secured only a half success which, by prolonging the agony, contributed to delay the catastrophe for the moment. After his time the Empire still lived on, but it suffered repeated shocks and was ever growing weaker. Poverty increased, the State became disorganized, and at the same time it grew more violent, oppressive, and rapacious; the Imperial fiscal system became

more severe; the atrocious dynastic tragedies recurred again and again; the army was demoralized, the defence of the frontiers weakened, the country became depopulated in favour of the towns, the little towns fell into ruins to the advantage of the large towns, the Barbarians percolated everywhere, culture in all its forms, arts, and philosophy deteriorated, religious struggles became envenomed, the unity of the Empire was broken, the East and the West fell asunder. The East defended itself better against the decadence than the West, for it was the birthplace of absolute monarchy, and the government could therefore consolidate itself better there than in the West. It found again in the Eastern dominions of the Empire its country of origin, and it was able to resist for a longer time the disintegrating forces. Indeed the real strength of the Empire retired little by little towards Asia while the West was succumbing to the repeated attacks of the Barbarians. From that time the ancient civilization was almost entirely destroyed in the West. For centuries in those vast regions which had once more become barbarian and deserted, or which

174 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

were colonized by Germanic invaders, there remained but a few vague memories and fragmentary vestiges of ancient culture. For several hundred years the only really vital element was the theology created during the last centuries of the Empire with the object of unifying, by a non-controversial interpretation of the sacred books, the doctrines of the new religion. For long centuries, theology remained in the West the only form of high culture which survived among the ruins of all the others; and it proved to be the means of preventing Europe from plunging back into complete and definite barbarism. It is, indeed, from this last surviving form of intellectual life that little by little were developed the other forms of culture: philosophy, literature, and law, in short all the great intellectual movements which culminated in the Renaissance. It was in the intellectual discipline which had been preserved by dogma all through the great chaos of the Middle Ages that little by little Europe found again and re-established that principle of authority which the Empire had sought in vain and which once more made it possible to reconsti-

tute strong and stable governments. But in proportion as Europe reconstituted the power of her governments and submitted herself to a vigorous political discipline, she became more intolerant of the intellectual unity which from the time of Constantine until the Reformation had appeared as a greater necessity than the organization of states and armies and which had been the bridge by which Europe had passed over the vast abyss of barbaric anarchy. From this time dates the organization of the great states and the intellectual emancipation from all authority. These movements were, for three centuries, to develop on parallel lines and to culminate in the present situation, involving states which possess a more formidable force than had before been known and which rest upon the greatest intellectual and moral anarchy, that is to say, on nothing.

Now that we have seen how the ancient civilization perished, it remains for us to find out what light its history can throw upon the conditions of today.

v
In the Third and Twentieth
Centuries

V

IN THE THIRD AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

THE causes that brought about the ruin of the ancient civilization were complex. The researches that we have made seem to prove that the downfall began with a great political crisis. It was a political conflict which, by letting loose an incurable spirit of anarchy, brought about little by little the disorganization of the ancient civilization in all its essential elements. We are able, however, to determine in what that political crisis consisted. The Roman Empire had endeavoured to reconcile two essentially different principles of authority: First, the monarchical system, which had had its development in the East, in Asia Minor, in Syria, and in Egypt, among the dynasties that held sway before and after the conquests of Alexander; secondly the republican principle, which had

180 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

been developed in Europe and especially in Greece and Italy, from the institutions of the ancient cities. The compromise of which the *Imperator* or *Princeps* was the symbol had always been incomplete, for it had not succeeded in defining the constitutional principle upon which the supreme authority of this republican monarchy was to be based. That principle was neither heredity, as was the case in the monarchies, nor a regular election the procedure of which was fixed by laws and traditions as in the republics. At the same time, so long as the Senate retained its ancient prestige and its immense authority, it was itself generally recognized as the source of legality for the Imperial authority. An emperor was held to be legitimate when, and only when, he had been recognized by the Senate. And the Senate succeeded for two centuries, though at the price of struggles which were sometimes very violent and of a bloody civil war, in ensuring the legal continuity of this *régime*. But, once the authority of the Senate was enfeebled by the advent of Septimius Severus and by the establishment of a real and absolute monarchy, there was no longer

Third and Twentieth Centuries 181

any clear and effective legitimate principle for the choice of an emperor; neither heredity nor election nor the validation of the Senate was accepted as the final authority. From this cause proceeded revolutions and wars which, as we have related, in the end destroyed the whole organization of the State.

At the root of this tremendous historical crisis, we find then the struggle between two opposing political principles, which could not be reconciled and which ended by mutually destroying each other. A striking confirmation of this historical view is given by the very different fates which overtook the Empire of the East and the Empire of the West. That which we are accustomed to style the downfall of the Roman Empire was in reality the ruin of civilization in the Western provinces. Weakened by incurable anarchy, submerged by the flood of invasions, the Europe which had been Roman was depopulated, became again practically barbarous, and was broken up into a large number of states which for centuries shared the common taint of instability. In the East, on the contrary, the Imperial authority which had taken the shape

182 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

of an absolute monarchy, resisted for yet many centuries the onslaught of destiny. The East succeeded in maintaining a certain degree of order, a military force, and a tradition of culture; it preserved a portion at least of the ancient civilization which had escaped from the crisis of the third century, the spirit of which was not too violently antagonistic to that of Christianity. It was due to this resistance that the East was able to become for the second time the educator of the West which had sunk back into barbarism. This vitality of the Empire of the East can however, be explained only by the different vicissitudes of the political crisis. The absolute and hereditary monarchy instituted by Constantine succeeded better in the East than in the West because it had found there its country of origin and in consequence the ground was favourably prepared by tradition. In reality, the East had never regarded the Roman Emperor in any other light than that of the successor and continuer of those kings which under various names had governed its states during the centuries preceding the Roman conquest. It had accepted the aris-

Third and Twentieth Centuries 183

tocratic republic of Augustus as a universal and unified monarchy. It was in fact the monarchical sentiment with which the East considered the person and authority of the Emperor that reacted on the West and that, during the first two centuries of the Empire, weakened the republican character of the Constitution of Augustus. It was because the people were accustomed to a government of functionaries that, during the third century, the East was less affected by the destruction of the aristocratic constitution which shook the whole social edifice in the West. In the West, on the other hand, when the aristocratic composition of Imperial society and the half republican, half monarchical régime of the Empire were destroyed, there remained practically no government. The old republican institutions were no longer possible while the hereditary monarchy, founded by Constantine, having no living roots in the sentiments of the people, became feeble and was incapable of defending the provinces against the invasion of the Barbarians or of restoring some semblance of order in the interior.

Considered from this point of view, the

184 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

historical experience of these earlier centuries is important for our present epoch. Europe finds itself in a situation which, on a larger basis, and under more complex forms, has a close analogy with that which we have described. I alluded to this in my first chapter, but it will be useful to return to the theme. The nations have not yet realized the political results produced by the World War, quite independent of the will and the plans of the men who seemed to guide its movements. Men still reason as if it were only the day after the Treaty of Utrecht. They have seen and still see only conquerors and vanquished, as if there had taken place a mere transfer of power and prestige from certain Powers to certain other Powers. They have not yet perceived that in the month of March, 1917, one of the two political principles on which rested the whole system of social order in Europe received its first formidable blow when the revolution in Russia broke out; that it received another blow, this time a decisive and mortal one, in the month of November, 1918, when the Empire of the Hapsburgs and that of the Hohenzollerns

Third and Twentieth Centuries 185

rotted and fell. They do not yet see that the overthrow of the monarchical system in Europe and the discrediting of the theory of rule by divine right, is an event of enormous importance; that it completes a political crisis begun two centuries ago; and that Europe is again in danger as in the third century of finding herself without any assured principle of authority.

A rapid but incisive survey of the events of the last two centuries may, after this study of the crisis of the ancient civilization, serve to throw a little light into the deep gloom which enveloped the future. Christian Europe emerged little by little from the catastrophe of the ancient civilization, and it succeeded in supplying a solution of the political problem which, according to the religious ideas that then dominated the minds of men, was almost perfect. It had given a sacred character to all governments alike, whether republican or monarchic, aristocratic or democratic, so long as they were legal, that is to say if they owed their origin to a legal act of indisputable validity, or which had been legalized by time. Obedience to these governments was a duty

186 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

imposed by God, so long as these governments imposed nothing contrary to the divine law. According to this conception of the State, too much importance must not be attached to the blunders and faults of these legitimate governments so long as these errors did not threaten to bring about general moral depravity, because the supreme aim of life was the moral and religious development of the individual, and this could be attained independently of the perfection of the government. The abuses of government were much more harmful to those who committed them than to those who were their victims; for these latter endured only material losses and suffering, while the former had laid heavy crimes on their consciences for which they would be called upon to give a rigorous account.

This conception of government co-ordinated fairly well the obligation of those at the head of affairs to govern well, and their claim to be obeyed with the right of the people to be governed justly, theirs only to obey, and the necessity for a certain tolerance for the errors and faults of those in power. Logical, how-

Third and Twentieth Centuries 187

ever, as this conception seemed to be, it was possible for it to be maintained only in the light of the religious ideas which were at that time dominant. It began to be broken down by the wave of incredulity which after the Thirty Years' War assailed all the governing classes of Europe. That war, by openly making use of Catholicism and Protestantism as factors in a great political struggle, became for Europe the first great school of religious skepticism. The eighteenth century opposed to authority, religious or political, philosophical and rationalistic conceptions that resulted in the French Revolution. Authority is a human thing; its source is found in the will of those who obey it, and who in consequence have the right to control it, and the true sovereign is therefore the people. In order to be just, the law must express simply the will of the people. The theory was plausible, and it seduced the spirit of an enlightened century which was full of confidence in itself and which was also for many reasons discontented with the *régime* to which it was subject. It reproached that *régime*, under the name of tyranny, with its feebleness, its slowness, its

188 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

spirit of routine, and its respect for traditions, and for vested rights.

The French Revolution attempted to apply the new principle; but the difficulties of application began the moment theory was left behind. Who were the people? How could their true will be recognized? Through what channels could it express itself? We know with what vacillations the French Revolution gave proof of the difficulties of the attempt to answer all these questions. One has only to consider all the constitutions that were elaborated by its leaders within the space of ten years in order to realize how difficult was the application of the principle of the sovereignty of the people. At one time the panacea was universal suffrage, at another fancy franchises or again suffrage by property qualifications that were assumed to be the wise method of securing expression for the real will of the people. In the end, the popular will became a mere formality by which to legitimize a military dictatorship that was founded by force, and that exercised an authority more absolute than that of the monarchy. But these tentative efforts are easily explained

Third and Twentieth Centuries 189

when we study the new sovereign who was to replace the old rulers. The people whose will should have governed the State displayed very little will and no understanding of government. From time to time, in fact, they showed a desire to renounce their power and to re-establish the authorities which they had planned to replace. Was it possible, however, to allow the new sovereign liberty to abdicate? The whole French Revolution writhed in this insoluble contradiction, for at bottom it was a contest made in the name of the sovereignty of the people on the part of a relatively small *élite* against the deep set will of the masses.

Indeed all the *régimes* founded at that time on a principle so vacillating and obscure were feeble and unstable; and they could not escape the military dictatorship which was the culmination of all the efforts of the Revolution. Sustained for a period by victories, the revolutionary rule collapsed in the face of disasters and defeats. Convulsed by so many wars, racked by the struggle between two antagonistic principles of authority, Europe then made a huge effort to reconcile

190 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

them and to re-establish lasting order. This was the work of the Congress of Vienna and of the Holy Alliance. While the Congress was deliberating how they might reconstitute Europe on the principle of legitimacy, that is to say how they could acknowledge antiquity and the loyalty of the people as the title to legitimate authority, the majority of the great states were of opinion that it was necessary to reinforce the legitimist principle by the concession of representative institutions. The legitimate dynasty re-entered France with the Charter in its hand. The Emperor of Russia was ambitious of playing the part of protector of liberty. The King of Prussia had also promised his people a constitution. Austria alone among the nations remained faithful to the doctrine of Absolutism. The other great monarchies were more or less whole-heartedly inclined towards a compromise between the two political principles based upon the subordination of the new principle to the old. Monarchy was to remain the sovereign principle of the state, and the representative institutions were to work under its control. This compromise would be furthered

Third and Twentieth Centuries 191

by the assurance of peace. It was through the aid of war that revolutionary ideas had for a time succeeded in breaking down monarchical institutions. The Holy Alliance was to be a truce concluded between the monarchies of Europe in order that their quarrels might not facilitate the work of revolution.

But the promise came to nought. In France the legitimate dynasty succeeded with the greatest difficulty in keeping the Chamber in the subordinate position to which it had been assigned by the Charter, although the Parliament was elected by but a minority of the wealthy classes. The struggle between the Crown and the Parliament, between Divine Right and the Sovereign people, between the old aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, became incessant, infuriated, and implacable. That struggle by the fears which it excited, contributed largely to the victory of the absolutist party throughout Europe, which was completed after 1821. Everywhere kings forgot to concede or refused to enforce the promised constitutions and Divine Right triumphed. This universal triumph of Divine

192 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Right throughout Europe, reacted in its turn upon France where Charles X, with the "monarchy-at-all-costs" party, assumed absolute control. The struggle between the two principles became envenomed until at last, during the days of July in 1830, it broke into revolution.

The legitimate dynasty was overthrown, and after a bloody struggle which lasted for three days the principle of the sovereignty of the people emerged victorious. But the revolutionists did not venture to exploit its victory to the full, to proclaim the Republic, and to crown the people as Sovereign of the State. Lafayette himself hesitated and when, on the 31st of July, the Duke of Orleans presented himself at the Hotel de Ville to render his personal homage to the Sovereign people, Lafayette appeared with him on the balcony with a tricolour flag. A clique of clever parliamentarians, skilfully manipulated by a banker, prepared a new compromise between the two principles; that is to say the monarchical bourgeoisie, or, as Louis Philippe himself defined it, a throne surrounded by republican institutions. The king recognized that the

Third and Twentieth Centuries 193

source of his authority was the people and the Parliament which represented the people; the hereditary peerage was abolished; electoral rights were somewhat enlarged while remaining strictly limited by property qualifications. The new compromise, however, succeeded hardly any better than the previous one. The contradiction of the qualified character of the suffrage and the doctrine of the will of the people was still tolerable under the legitimate monarchy. The monarchy asserted that it was the ultimate authority and was willing to accord to the popular will only a subordinate place, that of collaboration, so to speak. The bourgeois monarchy on the contrary was looked upon only as a delegation of the people who were assumed to have instituted it by their own will-power. But was it possible for the Sovereign people to be represented by a small minority of two hundred thousand property holders? It was during the years between 1830 and 1848, that by the reaction from this absurd contradiction, the doctrine of universal suffrage came to be the almost mystic expression of the sovereignty of the people.

194 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

The revolution of 1848 was for the people the great revenge. France threw down the bourgeois monarchy and, in constituting a republic based on universal suffrage, proclaimed the sovereignty of the people. In nearly all the countries of Europe, the people, following the lead of France, rose against absolute monarchy and demanded constitutions. The outburst was so great that all the monarchies, excepting Russia, were forced, at least for the time, to give way. As in France, almost all the great States of Europe proclaimed, in the place of government by Divine right, universal suffrage as the source of all authority. Then was repeated on a larger scale that which had already more obscurely happened at the time of the Revolution. The first enthusiasm wore out, Universal Suffrage, distrusting its own strength, hesitated to accept the supreme power; it looked about to find supports, and at last it turned towards the ancient principle of authority which it was supposed to have replaced. The National Assembly, elected in 1848 by Universal Suffrage, was composed about half of partisans of the monarchies of the old *régimes*, the other

Third and Twentieth Centuries 195

half being divided among different factions of improvised republicans. Its will was so confused and uncertain, its confidence in its authority so feeble, its actions so devoid of energy and consistency, that a great disorder swept over France. The Revolution soon found itself face to face with this paradoxical problem; had Universal Suffrage the right of abdicating its supreme authority in favour of the old *régime*? How could it be obliged to govern despite its reluctance? At last, in June, 1848, the extreme wing of the republican party rose against the Assembly and Universal Suffrage, accusing both of betraying the Revolution! They were vanquished and Universal Suffrage remained in theory master of the State, but it became further enfeebled and grew more and more discouraged in face of the internal and external difficulties, until the day when it was called upon to choose the president of the Republic. It made an attempt, with the aid of the hat and sword of Napoleon, to give to itself the air and appearance of sovereignty, and from that day the destiny of the Republic was sealed. Universal suffrage was utilized simply to legitimize by

196 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

a theoretical consultation a military monarchy, which was to be founded by a *coup d'État* and on the prestige of a name. The same drama was taking place more rapidly and in a more simple form in Germany. Hardly had the Parliament of Frankfort been elected than it began a quest, but for what? For an Emperor for the realm of Germany. Its only ambition was to replace the authority of the Pope of the Middle Ages by making appointment of a new Emperor. The Parliament addressed itself to the Emperor of Austria, to the Archduke John, to the King of Prussia; and when it saw that all these appeals were in vain, it allowed itself to be dissolved without making any great resistance, as if it had no more to do!

Everywhere the revolution of 1848 came to nothing. The Sovereignty of the People lasted but a moment. Two years later timid and distrustful constitutions by which the representative institutions were subordinated to monarchical power, as had been the case with the Charter of Louis XVIII, represented all that was left in the countries where Absolutism did not succeed, as in Austria, in with-

drawing all the concessions that had been made. The defeat was so serious that the democratic parties and their doctrines remained for three generations in a state of discouragement. But the victorious system of Divine Right was no less weakened by its victory than the vanquished principle by its defeat. That is the underlying tragedy of 1848, which gives the key to the whole history of Europe up to the time of the World War. The victorious principle was not only enfeebled by the concessions it had had to make in the face of the menace of revolution, and by the parliamentary institutions adopted by almost all the great States of Europe after 1848, but also by the discord which entered into the relations of the large and small monarchies of Europe. The Revolution did not root out the monarchies from the soil of Europe, but it did break up the Holy Alliance and the truce of Monarchies. Governed by Napoleon's nephew, France could no longer logically form part of a system which had been organized against the family of the new Emperor. The little King of Sardinia had been the first to venture in 1848 to tear up the

200 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

reigned by Divine Right and with a Parliament elected by universal suffrage, he brought into being the German Empire. Bismarck seemed then to have solved the problem which had been found insoluble by Charles X and Louis Philippe. He had made the monarchical principle collaborate with the democratic principle by subordinating the one to the other. For forty-four years, Germany carried out with success the political system which in 1830 had caused the fall of the legitimate dynasty in France. That is the reason why the war of 1870 had appeared to the conservative parties of the entire world as the revenge of the monarchy for the revolution of 1848 and as a conclusive triumph for the monarchical principle. During these forty-four years, the monarchy seemed to have consolidated itself in such a manner that it was no longer afraid of a great many democratic doctrines and institutions which, until that time, had been considered incompatible with kingly authority. Parliamentary institutions became general, Russia alone resisting them until 1905, and the base of representative institutions became broader. Even ~~the~~ Empire of

Austria at last adopted universal suffrage. Republican ideas more and more lost their hold and France found herself from a political point of view isolated. She succeeded by tense and continuous efforts in organizing a republic founded on universal suffrage and public opinion, but she remained the exception and alone amongst the Great Powers of Europe. Nor can it be doubted that France was able to pursue her audacious effort in relative tranquillity, partly because she reaped the benefit of the solidity and general order that had been assured to all Europe by the power of the monarchies. In the great struggle with democratic doctrines, begun in 1789, monarchy appeared to have carried off the final victory.

This was one more illusion. The agreement between the three great courts of Europe, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg, the base of the whole monarchical principle, had been for ever broken, and all the efforts made by Bismarck to re-establish it failed. Russia ended by allying herself to France. Conscript armies, that dangerous present made by the revolution to the monarchies, were developed,

202 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

especially in Germany and Russia. The prestige of the monarchical principle was augmented by these new armies of Xerxes, which were commanded by so many kings and emperors; but no one imagined that excess of power might become more dangerous than weakness. Finally, the monarchical system in Europe came to depend entirely on the hegemony of Germany, and that hegemony could in the end be maintained only by proving that the power which had founded it was as overwhelming as it had been in 1870 or more so. Sooner or later the day must come when Germany would be called upon to give that proof to the world! The day came, Germany and Austria attacked Russia with the enormous conscript armies that the development of industry had permitted them to organize. An unlimited war was the result, in which Austria and Germany destroyed Russia, and, in so doing, themselves committed suicide. The Russian revolution, by the example which it gave and by the void and anarchy which it created on the flank of the central empires; the unlimited war, by the atrocious exhaustion which it brought about of the resources and

the energies of both countries, combined to provoke the German and the Austrian revolutions. The fall of the Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns, after that of the Romanoffs, was the final catastrophe that overwhelmed the monarchical principle, that is to say the principle of authority which had dominated the greater part of Europe.

Europe finds itself, therefore, in this twentieth century, in the same situation which, in the third century, came to the Roman Empire: between two principles of authority both of which have shown themselves impotent, that is to say devoid of any assured principle of government. The great struggle between the monarchical and the democratic systems, which began in 1789, seems to have ended in the ruin of both adversaries. The monarchical principle is dead. Already shaken as it had been by skepticism, rationalism, the doctrines of equality, and the wars and revolutions of a century, it has been completely uprooted by the World War. Here and there thrones still exist in Europe but they are like rocks that tower above the deluge, and those who occupy them are not kings but shadows.

204 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

Europe may still see partial restorations, but these will represent only expedients and political compromises, and they will last just as long as the political compromises themselves. The respect, the admiration, and the almost religious confidence which have in times past been accorded to the principle of monarchy are dead. The disaster which killed them was terrible! But is the opposite principle, the system of democracy, which ought to have benefited by the downfall of kingship by Divine Right, in a position to replace it? It is doubtful. There are today in Western civilization, three governments that rest truly and exclusively on the principle of the Sovereignty of the People: Switzerland, France, and the United States. Switzerland is not only a little country but even as a little country she is under very special conditions; she can only therefore serve as a very limited example. The United States have shown that democratic institutions can govern even an immense continent, but they have demonstrated this fact in America; and America is not Europe. France is a great European state, governed by democracy, but she has

Third and Twentieth Centuries 205

succeeded in organizing democratic institutions by efforts tenacious and sometimes terrible, which have continued for more than a century, in a solid and tranquil Europe, and by sacrificing to that supreme aim many other precious interests. Nothing of the kind is to be found in the countries which have, during 1917 and 1918, improvised so many republics. These have adopted from one day to another institutions which up till then they had despised, based upon principles which had since 1848 been discredited in their eyes by the logic of events and by the work of clever propaganda. What faith can they have in these principles? Republican democracy is for those people but an improvisation of despair, the only alternative to which is the brutal dictatorship of force.

Russia has proved this. The democratic republic lasted there for eight months, from March to November, 1917. In the month of November, 1917, the Sovereign People, after a very short reign, were dispossessed by the dictatorship of the Communist party, or more precisely by the small oligarchy that dominates that party. One of the first exploits of

206 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

this oligarchy was to dissolve the Constituent Assembly. It then began a fierce campaign against the democratic systems of the West, by opposing to the bourgeois conception of democracy, the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is merely a preventative justification of a reign of absolutism. In Hungary, the republic fell under the dictatorship of the proletariat only to succumb after a few months in its turn to the military dictatorship by which the country is still governed. In Germany, the republic is struggling painfully between two extremes of opposition which attack it with ever-increasing energy from left and right. The same uncertainty prevails in the other recently reformed republics. Confusion and disorder have also infected those monarchies which by endeavouring to resemble republics as much as possible are still resisting the tide. I allude to Italy, Roumania, and Serbia.

This seems to be the greatest danger which at this moment threatens Western civilization. With the exception of France and Switzerland, the remainder of the continent of Europe does not see clearly how she can or ought to

Third and Twentieth Centuries 207

govern herself. She no longer believes in a universally respected principle of authority; and, a prey to the great uncertainty in which she is plunged, she allows herself to be easily seduced by revolutionary deliriums and dragged into mad adventures. The World War has produced many ruins, but the others are trifling in comparison with this destruction of all principles of authority! If Europe possessed governments of unquestioned power and of recognized authority, the work of reconstruction with all the formidable means at the disposal of Western civilization would be rapid and easy. But ruined as she is, plunged into the deepest misery, at grips with all sorts of political, economic, military, and diplomatic difficulties engendered by the war, devoid of governments capable of efficient rule, the greater part of Europe may soon fall into a long anarchy. The history of the third and fourth centuries enables us to realize what would then take place in Europe. The principle of authority is the key to all civilization; when the political system becomes disintegrated and falls into anarchy, civilization in its turn is rapidly broken up.

208 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

This is the reason why I have brought to the remembrance of my contemporaries this sketch of a tragic period of ancient history. Three countries find themselves today in a comparatively better situation,—the United States, England, and France. They have won the war, though at a terrible price. They are richer than the others; and they possess governments which amidst the general anarchy are still working. Let them beware of allowing themselves to be seduced by the illusion that they can isolate themselves in the midst of this all-prevading flow of anarchy! That anarchy would produce general disorganization in two thirds of Europe, and they would not fail to be engulfed in that immense abyss. Europe will be saved or will perish as a whole. It is for this reason that these countries must make use of their riches, their power, and of the relative state of order which they enjoy, to help the other countries to re-establish their condition and prosperity. The danger is the greater for all, because from certain points of view a crisis of anarchy would be much more dangerous in our time than it was in the third century. In the third

Third and Twentieth Centuries 209

century, State and Civilization became disorganized while two religious beliefs still held their own, namely Paganism and Christianity, —thereby limiting intellectual, moral, and, indirectly, political anarchy. Every man had at that time at least a certain number of ideas and principles in his mind which remained unassailable even if the entire universe crumbled away. If political anarchy which would be let loose with the fall of all principles of authority in Europe were now to supervene, there would be added to it the most complete intellectual anarchy that Europe has ever known. Each party or group which in the vagaries of that anarchy might gain possession of power for a day, would consider it had the right to remake the whole world on new principles! What utter disorder in the state, in morals, in culture, in the family, and in property, would result from such attempts, has been demonstrated to us in the case of Russia.

It would be wise to consider from this point of view the events that during the last three years have convulsed Russia. These might bring home to a civilization full of illusions

210 Ruin of the Ancient Civilization

as to its strength and authority, what the far-reaching consequences might be of the ruin of a principle of authority in an epoch which has no longer any intellectual discipline.

